

**Popes, Power, and World Politics:
From Leo XIII to Benedict XVI**

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Pope Pius IX died in 1878. The longest-reigning pope in history spent the last eight years of his pontificate as the self-styled “prisoner of the Vatican, as the anticlerical forces of Italian reunification had incorporated the ancient Papal States into the new Kingdom of Italy. (Pius had instructed his army to fire one volley, “for honor,” and then surrender their hopeless cause.) When Pius died, fears of foreign political interference in the election of a new pope led Britain’s Cardinal Henry Edward Manning to suggest that the conclave be held in Malta, under the protective guns of the Royal Navy.

Precisely one hundred years later – that is, precisely one hundred years after Leo XIII was elected pope at the lowest point in the papacy’s political fortunes in a millennium – another conclave, in 1978, elected as pope Cardinal Karol Wojtyła, who would have a greater influence on the history of his times than any pontiff since the high Middle Ages. According to the now-standard histories of the Cold War, John Paul II was the pivotal figure in the collapse of European communism (an argument that was widely dismissed, in both the Catholic and secular press, when I first advanced it in 1992). But the imprint of the shoes of this fisherman can be found beyond the democracies of central and eastern Europe; they can be found as well in the politics of Latin America, and East Asia. Moreover, John Paul’s critique of “real existing democracy” helped define the key moral issues of public life in the developed democracies and

in the complex world of international institutions; here, we see his impact as recently as our own presidential primaries.

Yet there is a paradox here: the “political” impact of John Paul II did *not* come from deploying what political realists recognize as the instruments of political power. Rather, the Pope’s capacity to shape history was exercised through a different set of levers.

As Bishop of Rome and sovereign of the Vatican City micro-state, John Paul had no military or economic power at his disposal. The Holy See maintains an extensive network of diplomatic relations and holds Permanent Observer status at the United Nations. But whatever influence John Paul had through these channels simply underscores the fact that the power of his papacy lay in a charism of moral persuasion capable of being translated into political effectiveness.

This paradox — political effectiveness achieved without the normal instruments of political power — is interesting in itself. It also has heuristic value.

It tells us something about the nature of politics in the early 21st century.

Contrary to notions widely accepted since the late 18th century, the public impact of John Paul II suggests that politics, or economics, or some combination of politics-and-economics, is not the only, or perhaps even the primary, engine of history. The revolution of conscience that John Paul ignited in June 1979 in Poland — the moral revolution that made the nonviolent political Revolution of 1989 possible — cannot be explained in conventional political-economic categories. Something else was afoot – something in the realm of the human spirit. Thus John Paul’s public accomplishment provided empirical, historical ballast for intellectual and moral challenges to several potent modern theories of politics, including French revolutionary

Jacobinism, Marxism-Leninism, and utilitarianism. The political world just doesn't work the way the materialists claim.

The paradox in the public impact of John Paul II also reminds us of five other truths: that the power of the human spirit can ignite world-historical change; that tradition can be as potent a force for social transformation as a self-consciously radical rupture with the past; that moral conviction can be an Archimedean lever for moving the world; that "public life" and "politics" are not synonymous; and that a genuinely humanistic politics always depends upon a more fundamental constellation of free associations and social institutions in which we learn the truth about ourselves as individuals and as members of communities.

In sum, and precisely because it was *not* mediated through the "normal" instruments of political power, the "worldly accomplishment" of John Paul II suggests the happy prospect of freed, for the first time since 1789, from the tyranny of politics. By demonstrating in action the linkage between profound moral conviction and effective political power, the public accomplishments of John Paul II helped restore politics to its true dignity while keeping politics within its proper sphere.

The distinctive *modus operandi* of this politically-potent Pope also suggested something about the future of the papacy, the world's oldest institutional office, and about Catholicism in the third millennium of its history.

It was, and is, tempting to see John Paul's public accomplishment as the expression of his singular personal experience. John Paul II's "culture-first" view of history and his bold confidence in the political efficacy of moral truth were indeed deeply influenced by his *curriculum vitae*. His Slavic sensitivity to spiritual power in history (prefigured in Soloviev and

paralleled in Solzhenitsyn); his Polish convictions about the cultural foundations of nationhood (shaped by a lifelong immersion in the literary works of Mickiewicz, Norwid, and Słowacki); his experience in the underground resistance during World War II and his leadership in a culturally-based resistance to communism from 1947-1978 — all of these were, if you will, distinctively “Wojtyśan” experiences. History viewed from the Vistula River basin *does* look different than history viewed from Berlin, Paris, London, or Washington, D.C. This “difference” certainly shaped the potent public presence of the first Slavic and Polish pope.

But John Paul II insisted that he was *not* a “singularity,” to adapt a term from astrophysics. Rather, he and his pontificate, as he understood them, were the products of the contemporary Catholic Church, as the Church has been shaped by the Second Vatican Council — which Karol Wojtyśa has always understood as a great, Spirit-led effort to renew Catholicism as an evangelical movement in history. I would press this farther. In the paradoxical public potency of John Paul II, we are seeing played out, in dramatic form, trends that have been underway in Catholicism for two centuries: trends that were waiting, so to speak, for a new kind of pope to forge a new kind of interaction between the papacy and the world of power.

II.

That popes have been “players” in the world of power since at least the 5th century pontificate of Pope Leo the Great is a well-known fact of Western history (if there *are* “well-known facts of Western history” these days!). So is the fact that, from 756 until 1870, the popes were temporal rulers of a large part of central Italy, the Papal States. The details of that millennium-long history of temporal power are beyond the scope of this lecture. Suffice it to say that it is a tale in which the student of history will find goodness and wickedness, justice and

injustice, civility and incivility, ecclesiastical interference in civil affairs and political interference in internal Church affairs. But from this vastly complex story, in which the popes were civilizers as well as temporal rulers, and political leaders on more than one occasion because of the default of those who ought to have taken political responsibility, three key points may be drawn.

The first involves the pope's unique position as universal pastor of a global Church. From at least the late 4th century, when Pope Gelasius I distinguished between "the consecrated authority of the priesthood" and the "royal power" as two distinct modes of authority "by which this world is ruled on title of original and sovereign right," it has been understood that the pope cannot be the subject of any other sovereignty. He must himself be a *sovereign*, in the specific, technical sense that the free exercise of his universal ministry cannot be subject to any higher earthly power. Indeed, as Father Robert Graham, SJ, wrote forty-some years ago, "the papacy was exercising a form of sovereignty long before that word took on the clear-cut political and juridical meaning it was later to have."¹ That is why papal diplomacy is not conducted by the pope as head of Vatican City State, but as an expression of the sovereignty of the "Holy See" — the juridical embodiment of the universal pastoral ministry of the Bishop of Rome. The recognition of this papal sovereignty in the exchange of ambassadors between the Holy See and sovereign states, and in the Holy See's representation in international organizations, tells us something about the world as well as about the papacy: it is a tacit recognition that moral norms

¹ Robert A. Graham, S.J., *Papal Diplomacy: A Study of Church and State on the International Plane* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 157.

are relevant in international public life and that there are actors in the drama of world politics other than states.

The second lesson to be drawn from the papacy's entanglement with temporal power involves the Church's role in the creation of civil society. The *libertas ecclesiae*, the "freedom of the Church," has been a check on the pretensions of state power for centuries, whether that be the power of feudal lords, absolutist monarchs, or the modern secular state. Where the Church retains the capacity to order its life and ministry according to its own criteria, to preach the Gospel, and to offer various ministries of charity to the wider society, that very fact constitutes a *pluralist principle* in society. According to that principle, there are spheres of conviction and action where state power does not, or ought not try to, reach.

However confusedly the various popes may have sought to assert this principle theologically or to secure it practically, the fact remains that the *libertas ecclesiae* was a crucial factor in creating the social space on which other free institutions could form over the centuries; the controversies between Becket and Henry II, or between Gregory VII and Henry IV, were about more than the relative positions of these men in the societies of their time. No matter how tyrannically some of its occupants behaved on occasion, the papacy *as an institutional reality* has been a barrier to the tyranny of the political for a millennium and a half or more. And if the institutions of "civil society" are schools for learning the proper exercise of political freedom, then the papacy's defense of the *libertas ecclesiae* helped lay the foundations of modern democracy.

In many instances, however, the papacy's involvement with temporal power involved a tacit commitment to play the political game by the accepted "realist" rules. And therein lies the

third lesson for today: that *this* kind of entanglement, the agreement to play by others' rules, can lead to difficulties and betrayals. The worst of these were in the realm of the human spirit and involved attempts to coerce consciences (as Pope John Paul II acknowledged on the First Sunday of Lent, 2000, when he asked God's forgiveness for the times in which the Church had used coercive state power to enforce its truth claims). But there was another, perhaps less familiar, dimension to this aspect of the problematic of entanglement: the fact of the Papal States and the pope's position as a temporal sovereign could lead the papacy into alliance politics which set the universal pastor against part of the flock. In 1830-31, for example, Pope Gregory XVI sided with Czarist Russia as it suppressed a rebellion of independence-minded Poles, because of the complex web of European alliance politics and then-regnant Catholic theories of the rights of constituted sovereigns.

For the sake of concision, let me call the deep entanglement of the Church and the papacy with state power, and the papacy's tacit acceptance of criteria for political judgment that were sometimes incompatible with the Church's evangelical mission and the papacy's evangelical function, the "Constantinian arrangement" — and to note that this state of affairs was the product of both a distinctive history and a strategic judgment: that the Church's truth claims and public position required the buttressing of something like "Christendom." This "Constantinian arrangement" had multiple theological and practical tensions built into it from the outset. With the Second Vatican Council and the pontificate of John Paul II, a renewed ecclesial self-understanding and different historical circumstances have created a new model of engagement between the papacy and power. With Vatican II and John Paul II, what I am calling the "Constantinian arrangement" has been quietly buried.

The beginnings of a new form of papal engagement with the world of power date to the mid-19th century. At that point, the Papal States had been under continuous pressure for forty years, first from revolutionary France and Napoleon, later from Italian nationalism. The popes resisted the loss of their temporal sovereignty to the bitter end. Yet as the old edifice of papal temporal power was crumbling, the first probes toward a papacy of witness and moral suasion could be detected.

Cambridge historian Owen Chadwick locates the first of these probes in 1839, when Pope Gregory XVI condemned the slave trade. It was a condemnation he had no capacity to enforce; Gregory XVI couldn't even get the Portuguese government, the chief offender on this score, to pay him any attention. But he did it anyway, in an effort at moral persuasion. A new method of papal engagement with the world of power could also be detected in the mid-19th century popes' struggles with European governments, defending local bishops and local churches on contested questions such as local episcopal authority and marriage law. Here, for the first time, the popes brought into play the levers of international public opinion and the international press. During this period, the popes gained more effective control over local churches; but this trend, often deplored as "centralization," also meant that the popes could help local churches against various governmental pressures. Because of this, Chadwick concludes, Catholics in Germany, France, the United Kingdom (and even Spain and Austria) came to think of papal power as "indispensable to their freedoms."²

² Owen Chadwick, *A History of the Popes, 1830-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 39.

In 1854, 1862, 1867, and 1869-70, large numbers of bishops came to Rome from all over the world for the doctrinal definition of Mary's immaculate conception, for a protest against encroachments on the temporal power, to celebrate the jubilee of the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, and to participate in the First Vatican Council. These bishops' presence in Rome demonstrated to the European powers that the Church had a life of its own, independent of the assertive modern state and its tendency to occupy every nook and cranny of social space. The largest of these gatherings, Vatican I, was, among many other things, a pivotal moment in the emergence of a new form of papal engagement with the world of power. The Council's declaration that the pope enjoyed a universal pastoral jurisdiction denied, as a matter of principle, that the modern state had any role in the Church's internal governance; this in turn began a process in which the authority of local bishops (5/6 of whom were appointed by governments in the early 19th century) was once again tied to their communion with the Bishop of Rome, rather than to their "communion" with their temporal rulers. The large representation of Catholic bishops from outside Europe at the Council demonstrated, against European secularists, that the Catholic Church was not simply a department of the European *ancien régime*. And the immense personal popularity of Pope Pius IX, widely perceived throughout the Catholic world as a victim of unscrupulous men of power after the loss of the Papal States in 1870, bound individual Catholics to the papacy while creating the modern model of the pope as a charismatic public personality.

The demise of the Papal States was, in fact, the crucial change creating the conditions for the possibility of a papacy that engaged world politics with its own evangelical instruments. This first became evident in the pontificate of Leo XIII, "the first Pope since Charlemagne not to

inherit a state to govern.”³ Leo’s 1879 encyclical on the reform of Thomism, *Aeterni Patris*, suggested that the Church had a distinctive way of engaging the intellectual life, as well as a spiritual life independent of modern state politics. *Rerum Novarum*, Leo’s 1891 encyclical “on the condition of the working class” and the Magna Carta of Catholic social doctrine, became a powerful instrument in the hands of a papacy seeking to teach the nations, not rule them — a papacy exerting its influence by *argument*. (Could such a statement of social doctrine have been issued if the popes had remained temporal rulers of the Papal States, burdened with the notion that they possessed plenipotentiary power in social, economic, and political life? It seems unlikely, perhaps even impossible.)

As with any historical process involving a venerable institution, though, the evolution of a “post-Constantinian” papacy from Pius IX to John Paul II was complex and uneven. At the same time as the popes were exploring new modes of engagement with politics and the world of power, the Holy See sought to restore itself as a player in international affairs after the loss of the Papal States. The Lateran Treaty of 1929 settled one problem: as sovereign of Vatican City State (all 108.7 acres of it!), the pope was not subject to any higher temporal authority. Throughout the turbulent mid-years of the twentieth century, the Holy See tenaciously sought to rebuild its diplomatic relations, to secure the Church’s legal standing in modern states, and to give the Church a place at the table in international forums. The table was not always welcoming. In 1919, the Holy See had diplomatic relations with only twenty-six states, principally from Latin America, and Pope Benedict XV was blocked from participating in the Versailles peace

³ Chadwick, *op.cit.*, p. 330.

conference by Clause 15 of the secret accord that bound Italy to the Allies in 1915.

Conventional ways of thinking about international affairs could lead to myopia at the Vatican at times when clarity of evangelical and moral insight would have been welcome. No serious student of these matters believes that Pope Pius XII was an anti-Semite or that Pius welcomed the prospect of a Nazi-dominated Europe. Indeed, serious students of this period know that Pius XII took heroic actions on behalf of European Jews and other victims of Nazism, to the point of acting as a middle-man in a plot to overthrow Hitler by force.⁴ At the same time, senior diplomatic figures in the Holy See may have been so conditioned by realist modes of analysis that they missed the totalitarian difference in German National Socialism, thinking it rather a particularly ugly form of classic German nationalism.⁵ If this is true, it must be noted that the Holy See's diplomats were not alone in this misreading. But it must also be said that one expects more in terms of moral clarity from the Holy See than from Number Ten Downing Street or the French Foreign Ministry – perhaps *especially* the French Foreign Ministry.

In any event, by the mid-1960s the Holy See's quest for a place at the table of international political life had been vindicated. The Holy See had full diplomatic relations with fifty-two countries in 1965 and a settled place as a Permanent Observer at the United Nations since 1964. While these developments were unfolding in the aftermath of World War II, Pius XII

⁴ See Owen Chadwick, *Britain and the Vatican during the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 86-100.

⁵ See Pierre Blet, S.J., *Pius XII and the Second World War: According to the Archives of the Vatican* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 48-49, 55, 58, 60.

and John XXIII developed the model of the pope as a charismatic public figure with international moral authority. Then came the crucial moment: the Second Vatican Council, whose teaching accelerated the transformation of Catholicism into a “post-Constantinian” Church and made possible the re-constitution of the papacy as a primarily evangelical institution.

Rather than conceiving the Church by analogy to the state, as both theology and canon law had done for centuries, the Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* described the Church as an evangelical movement with a global mission, a movement in which the purpose of office (including the Office of Peter) is to facilitate the response of all the baptized to the universal call to holiness. According to *Lumen Gentium*, every other function of the Church, including its relationship to the worlds of power, must serve these primary purposes of evangelization and sanctification.

The Council’s *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, whose proximate intellectual origins can be traced to old Woodstock College in the Archdiocese of Baltimore and the work of Father John Courtney Murray, SJ, taught that the state was incompetent in theological questions and declared that the Church would no longer put coercive state power behind its truth claims. In doing so, *Dignitatis Humanae* made possible the emergence of the Catholic Church as an assertive, effective proponent of basic human rights.

Vatican II’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* portrayed the free and virtuous society in pluralistic terms, as created by the interaction of a political system, an economic system, and a cultural system. In doing so, it suggested an image of the Church as the teacher and evangelist of culture, rather than a political player in the conventional sense.

And the Council’s *Declaration on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church* drew a

bright line between the Church and the world of power by teaching that, in the future, governments would not be allowed “rights or privileges” in the nomination of bishops.⁶

On the other hand, as if to underline the unevenness of evolutionary change in large institutions and the complexity of the issues involved in the encounter between the Office of Peter and the world of power, the immediate post-Vatican II period witnessed what may have been the last significant initiative in the 1,650-year history of the “Constantinian” papacy: the *Ostpolitik* of Pope Paul VI (the former Giovanni Battista Montini) and his “foreign minister,” Archbishop Agostino Casaroli.

The Montini/Casaroli *Ostpolitik* was a fourteen-year long attempt to achieve, through bilateral diplomacy, a *modus non moriendi* (a “way of not dying”) with the communist states of central and eastern Europe. The *Ostpolitik* included both a tacit papal commitment to avoid a public moral critique of Marxist-Leninist systems, and efforts by the Holy See to curb the activities of clandestinely-ordained underground priests and bishops in Warsaw Pact countries. This diplomatic strategy of *salvare il salvabili* (“saving what could be saved,” as Casaroli often described it) was informed by two “realist” political assumptions: that the Yalta division of Europe was a fact of international life for the foreseeable future, and that the breach marked by the iron curtain would only be closed by a gradual “convergence,” in which a slowly liberalizing

⁶ See *Christus Dominus*, 20. This concrete “separation” of Church and state was made legally binding within Latin-rite Catholicism by the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which confirmed that “No rights and privileges of election, appointment or designation of bishops are hereafter granted to civil authorities” [Canon 377.5].

East eventually met an increasingly social-democratic West. During that glacial process, Montini and Casaroli agreed, the Church had to make provision for the appointment of bishops and the continuity of the Church's sacramental life by reaching agreements with existing governments, even if such agreements were deplored (as they usually were) by the local underground Church.⁷

In electing a Polish pope in 1978, the College of Cardinals did not consciously reject this strategy of accommodation (which Paul VI, who was deeply ambivalent about it, described privately as “not a policy of glory”). Some of those who promoted Cardinal Karol Wojtyła's candidacy were advocates (and, in the case of Cardinal Franz König of Vienna, an architect) of the *Ostpolitik*. But in the first year of his pontificate, John Paul II made clear that he intended to pursue, personally, a different tack — a “post-Constantinian” strategy of resistance through moral revolution.

Three times in the first four days of his pontificate, John Paul vigorously defended religious freedom as the first of human rights and the non-negotiable litmus test of a just society; it was a theme that had been muted under the *Ostpolitik* of Paul VI and Archbishop Casaroli. Then, during his epic first pilgrimage to Poland in June 1979, John Paul comprehensively unveiled his strategy of political change through moral revolution. By returning to his people their authentic history and culture, and thus giving them a form of power that the regime's rubber bullets and truncheons could not reach, the Pope demonstrated that the communist emperor had

⁷ Montini and Casaroli were also concerned about what might happen in underground local Churches cut off from the supervision of Rome, a concern which, in some instances, proved warranted.

far fewer clothes than “realist” analysts (including both western political leaders and Vatican diplomats) suspected. In doing so, he opened the path to the emergence of Solidarity. And the rest, as they say, is history.

In his posthumously-published memoirs, *Il martirio della pazienza* [*The Martyrdom of Patience*], the late Cardinal Casaroli, whom John Paul II appointed his Secretary of State in April 1979, suggests that there was no substantive difference between his *Ostpolitik* and the “eastern politics” of John Paul, only a difference of “phases.” This is not a claim that will withstand close scrutiny, as two examples will illustrate. Just before John Paul’s address to the United Nations in October 1979, Cardinal Casaroli systematically went through the draft text of the speech, eliminating references to religious freedom and other human rights issues the Soviet Union and its satellites might find offensive; John Paul just as systematically restored the cuts. Then in 1983, shortly after the Pope had had what diplomats refer to as a “frank exchange of views” over martial law with General Wojciech Jaruzelski (those outside the door heard fists being pounded on desks inside), John Paul, standing at the window of the dining room of the archbishop’s residence in Kraków, engaged in some banter with students clamoring outside, while several guests, including Cardinal Casaroli, tried to continue their dinner. Finally, as Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger told me fifteen years later, Cardinal Casaroli exploded, saying to the startled dinner table, “What does he want? Does he want bloodshed? Does he want war? Does he want to overthrow the government? Every day I have to explain to the authorities that there is nothing to this!” That does not sound like the reaction of a man whose differences with his superior were merely matters of tactics or timing.

The more plausible explanation of the relationship between Pope John Paul II and

Cardinal Casaroli — an explanation that illustrates the complex dynamics of the relationship of the papacy to power at this transitional moment in papal history — is that, in appointing this skilled churchman, the architect of Paul VI’s *Ostpolitik*, as his own Secretary of State, John Paul was deliberately adopting a dual strategy. Remnants of a “Constantinian” approach to playing by the rules-of-the-game would be deployed for whatever they might achieve; the diplomatic dialogues initiated by Casaroli over the previous fourteen years would continue, and the communist regimes in question could not charge the Vatican with “reversing course” or renegeing on formal agreements. Meanwhile, the Pope himself would pursue a “post-Constantinian” strategy of appealing directly to peoples who could be aroused to new, nonviolent forms of resistance — and thence to self-liberation — through a call to moral arms and a revival of Christian humanism.⁸

The new *Ostpolitik* of John Paul II was the clearest example to date of a “post-Constantinian” model of engagement between the papacy and the world of power. It was unmistakably different from the Montini/Casaroli *Ostpolitik*, ecclesiologically, strategically, and

⁸ John Paul combined a robust faith in the power of religious and moral truth with a commitment to the independence of the resistance movements he inspired. Thus in 1983 the Pope refused to cut a deal with the Polish government behind Solidarity’s back, when some suggested making the Polish Church the state’s formal interlocutor and letting Solidarity wither and die. For John Paul, this was a matter of principle, not simply of prudent tactics. The Church did not demand control of the political forces its teaching had helped create; that was not the Church’s role, according to the evangelical vision of Vatican II.

tactically. It marked a decisive break-point with the “Constantinian” arrangement of the past.

III.

What does all this mean for the future? Let me begin to attempt an answer by telling a tale of two journalists.

One of them, a distinguished American columnist and a Jew who has been known to say, “I don’t know whether I believe in God but I sure fear Him,” asked me, on May 16, 2000, who the next pope would be. I said I hadn’t got the faintest idea, to which he replied, “Well, will he be like John Paul?” Yes, I replied, I thought the next pope would continue the evangelical style of John Paul II, including the papal role as global defender of basic human rights. Good, my friend said — and then laughed. When I asked what was so funny he said, “You know, in 1978, I couldn’t have cared less who the next pope would be. Now it’s something important to me.” My friend has no personal religious investment in the papacy. But he recognized that there was something good for the world in the fact of a universal moral reference point, embodied in an ancient office whose occupant acted in world affairs according to the logic of the Church’s truth claims, rather than according to the realist rules-of-the-game.

Three days later, Vittorio Messori, a prominent Italian journalist who had been John Paul II’s interlocutor in the international bestseller, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, wrote a column in Turin’s *La Stampa* arguing that twenty-two years of Slavic exceptionalism and “agitation” had been enough for the Church, and that a return to “normality” was called for — by which Messori meant a return to the Italian papacy. Italians, Messori argued, had a native disposition for the papal office and for maneuvering deftly through the rocks and shoals of history.

The American Jewish agnostic, it seems to me, had a clearer insight into what the papacy

of John Paul II meant for the Church and the world than the Italian Catholic journalist. And while he would obviously not put it in these terms, my agnostic friend also had a firmer grasp on the fact that the Church, while a “resident alien” in the world, always exists *for* the world, for the world’s salvation, than the Catholic commentator for whom the Church remains primarily an institution to be managed.

In the locks along the ship canal that divides Seattle north and south, salmon swimming home to spawn pass through a series of “trapgates,” beyond which there is no possibility of return. With the Second Vatican Council as authoritatively interpreted and embodied by John Paul II, the Catholic Church passed through a trapgate in history from which there is no turning back. For there was a logic — a *theo-logic*, if you will — in the evangelical/pastoral model of the papacy Wojtyła so brilliantly embodied.

There is no one image of Peter in the New Testament, but rather a tapestry of images: Peter the fisherman-disciple, who “left everything” to follow Jesus (*Luke 5.10-11*); Peter the witness to great moments in the ministry of Jesus, including the raising of Jairus’s daughter (*Mark 5.37*) and the Transfiguration (*Mark 9.2*); Peter the shepherd, entrusted with the keys to the kingdom of heaven (*Matthew 16.19*) and enjoined to feed the Lord’s lambs (*John 21.15-17*); Peter the first confessor of the faith, whose sermon on Pentecost after the outpouring of the Spirit marks the beginning of Christian mission (*Acts 2.14-41*); Peter the visionary who is given supernatural guidance as he baptizes the Gentile centurion Cornelius and his family (*Acts 10.9-16*); Peter the Christian martyr, whose ministry means being led, finally, “where you do not wish to go” (*John 21.8*). But the “figure in the tapestry,” to adapt an image from Henry James, the thread that ties these multiple images together, is Peter’s distinctive mission to “strengthen the

brethren” (*Luke 22.32*) — the psalm antiphon at John Paul II’s golden jubilee of priestly ordination.

John Paul II revitalized the papacy for the 21st century by retrieving and renewing the Office of Peter’s first-century roots, which lie in the New Testament’s portrait of Peter’s unique role as the apostle who “strengthens the brethren.” In doing so, John Paul aligned the exercise of the Office of Peter with the Second Vatican Council’s teaching on the nature of the episcopate, in which, the Council Fathers write, “preaching the Gospel has pride of place.”⁹ Bishops are, first and foremost *evangelists*, not managers. As John Paul has demonstrated with effect, that is as true for the Bishop of Rome as it is for the bishop of the smallest missionary diocese.

To argue that the pontificate of John Paul II constitutes a decisive moment of development in the Office of Peter in the Church is not to say that the “post-Constantinian” papacy will be without its own ambiguities and tensions, however.

There are built-in ecumenical tensions in the exercise of a global papal ministry of moral witness and persuasion. More than a few evangelical Protestants find this the most compelling aspect of John Paul II’s papacy. But the development of this model in the 21st century may cause further difficulties with Orthodox Christians, some of whom will see in it a claim of universal jurisdiction they cannot abide. I think they will be mistaken in this, for, as John Paul II suggested in the 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, the papacy’s universal ministry of witness need *not* include a jurisdictional role in the East of the sort the Bishop of Rome exercises in the West. But psychology can be as determinative as theology in these matters, and Catholics must frankly face

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

the fact that the emergence of an evangelical/pastoral papacy with universal “reach” has added another item to the list of problems to be sorted out with an ever-anxious eastern Orthodoxy.

There are also tensions between the evangelical/pastoral model of the papacy and the current diplomatic position of the Holy See. Despite a bizarre effort a few years ago to strip the Vatican of its Permanent Observer status at the U.N., the issue here is not whether the Holy See *can* act as a diplomatic agent with international legal “personality;” that is a long-settled issue in international law and diplomatic practice. The question is, *should* it?

At the moment, the Holy See enjoys full diplomatic exchange at the ambassadorial level with some 180 countries. In developed democracies in which the Church’s legal position is secure, this diplomatic representation has little to do with public affairs, and the papal nuncio functions almost exclusively as the papal representative to the Catholic Church in a given country, a representation that has to do primarily with the selection of bishops. In new democracies, papal diplomacy has helped secure free space for the Church to function, through concordats and other legal instruments. In places where Catholics are under pressure or persecuted, the papal nuncio can function as a safeguard for local Catholics: a lifeline to Rome, and to the capacity of popes to focus the spotlight of international public attention on things that authoritarian regimes would rather keep hidden. The *fact* that the Holy See is a recognized international diplomatic and legal actor also gives the Church and the pope a means of engaging totalitarian regimes with whom the Holy See does not have diplomatic relations, which are usually countries in which the local Church is too weak to defend itself effectively.

On the international plane, where issues of grave moral import are now regularly being decided, the diplomatic *quiddity*, so to speak, the diplomatic *reality* of the Holy See can make a

significant difference.¹⁰ John Paul II's defense of the universality of basic human rights at the United Nations in 1979 was a factor in the collapse of communism, as it was in 1995 in meeting the challenge of those who claimed that the very idea of "human rights" was Western "cultural imperialism." The Pope's personal campaign prior to the 1994 Cairo World Conference on Population and Development, and adroit Holy See diplomacy in Cairo itself, frustrated the efforts of the Clinton Administration and its European and NGO allies to have abortion-on-demand declared a fundamental human right under international law. Benedict XVI has continued this pattern in his 2006 Regensburg Lecture on faith and reason, and in his recent defense of universal human rights rooted in the natural moral law, during his address to the U.N. General Assembly. In both cases, Benedict XVI has been pressing for a new pattern of interreligious dialogue, particularly with Islam, one that does not avoid the hard questions but that begins with them: including the questions of religious freedom and the separation of spiritual and political authority in the modern state. In doing so, Benedict XVI has set in motion dynamics of dialogue within the Islamic world, and between Islam and the rest, the impact of which can only be measured in centuries.

There are undoubtedly ambiguities in aspects of this kind of papal engagement with the world of power; in trying to accomplish certain moral ends (e.g., to secure universal access to education and parental rights in education) the Holy See may find itself acceding to declarations

¹⁰ In addition to its Permanent Observer status at the U.N., the Holy See is represented diplomatically at the European Union, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Organization of American States.

full of other dubious matter (e.g., the international Convention on the Rights of the Child). But it is also true that something important would have been lost, these past two decades, had the Holy See and the papacy not been diplomatically engaged on the international plane.

It is extremely unlikely that any pope in the foreseeable future will dismantle the Holy See's diplomatic network. In some instances, this would damage the position of hard-pressed local Churches. Internationally, it would mean abandoning a modest but real leverage that, in itself, is arguably good for the international system: the leverage of moral suasion, which reminds the world of power that the world of power is not all there is.

But try, for a moment, a thought-experiment: From the Church's distinctively evangelical point of view, would the abandonment of international legal and diplomatic linkages between the Office of Peter and the world of power be *desirable*? Is this engagement not in deep tension with the notion of the Church as an evangelical movement in history? Can popes be moral witnesses and "players" at the same time? Wouldn't it be simpler, cleaner, purer if the papacy abandoned all formal linkages to the structures of worldly power and acted as an agency of moral witness *alone*?

It depends on what you mean by *Church* and by *politics*.

The Church, according to Vatican II, is an evangelical movement in history. To be such a movement *in history* means to have a concrete institutional form and to deal with other institutions through the best means that human beings have developed for ordering our common life: law and politics. The Church is not a state and must carefully avoid acting like a state. But the Catholic Church is more than a voluntary association with a cause. It is the institutional embodiment of truth claims, and according to its own self-understanding, the basic forms of that

institutionalization are of the will of God: the Church as a *communio* of believers; the episcopate, the priesthood, and the Office of Peter as servants of that *communio* and its service to the world.

However ambiguously — and the ambiguities will be lessened if the Church of the third millennium further develops the “post-Constantinian” model of engagement with power — the fact of the papacy’s formal entanglement with national and international political structures is an expression of the Church’s reality as a sovereign community: a community that fully possesses the means to achieve its spiritual ends, and is therefore neither dependent on, nor subject to, other sovereignties in the pursuit of those ends. That expression is important, for the Church to be what she is.

The reality of the papacy’s formal entanglement with politics is also important for politics, however. If by “politics” we mean the will-to-power and my capacity to impose my will on you, then it would be unseemly, even self-contradictory, for an evangelical movement committed to the method of persuasion to be a “player” in that game. But if by “politics,” even international politics, we mean both the quest for power *and* mutual deliberation about the *oughts* of our common life — if in politics, even the politics of nations, we understand ourselves to be engaged in the sphere of ethics — then things look different. A global evangelical movement constituted as a sovereign institution for its own spiritual ends has a place at the table in the deliberation of those *oughts*. That “place” is both a reminder of the ethical dimension of the exercise of power and a check on the absolutist tendency built into all modern politics. By reminding the world of power that it is not sovereign over all aspects of life, the papacy, engaged diplomatically, performs an invaluable service to the world of power. It is not the power to bring princes to confession on their knees, in the snow. It is more important than that.

The Holy See today plays a crucial role in mounting one crucial kind of moral argument — an argument rooted in the inalienable dignity of the human person — in an international political environment in which multiple other “moral” claims are in play: the claims of jihadists, bent on creating a global caliphate or on hastening the return of the Twelfth Imam; the claims of the utilitarians, and their and its reduction of the human person to an object fit for biotechnological or genetic manipulation. For the papacy to withdraw from formal involvement in international political life would be to concede, in practice, a considerable part of the terrain of moral argument to these forces with very different, and deeply anti-humanistic, projects for the human future. The Holy See is not the only actor engaged in moral and political combat with these forces; but as John Paul II and Benedict XVI have demonstrated, the Holy See can be the world’s most potent and effective defender of the dignity of the human person as the foundation of rightly-ordered thinking about politics.

Thus, precisely for the world’s sake, the Church must continue to run the risks of ambiguity in its engagement with worldly power – even as the papacy of the 21st century continues to be transformed through the thought and action of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, heirs and legatees of the Second Vatican Council.

[This lecture is an adaptation of Chapter Six of George Weigel’s newest book, *Against the Grain: Christianity and Democracy, War and Peace* published by Crossroad.]