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# Victor Gaetan: In diplomacy, the Holy See "does not lie or mislead"

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The expert on Vatican diplomacy explains how the pope and his diplomatic team have a unique approach the conflict in Ukraine, founded in natural law.

ince Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Pope Francis has been particularly active, making numerous calls for peace, speaking directly with Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and sending two cardinals to support refugees.

To understand Pope Francis' and the Holy See's diplomatic approach to this conflict, I.MEDIA spoke with Victor Gaetan, an expert on Vatican diplomacy. Originally from Romania, the author of God's Diplomats now lives in Washington, DC, and is a regular contributor to Foreign Affairs magazine and the National Catholic Register.

## **Daily prayer**

- $\bigstar$  And today we celebrate...
- ★ Prayer for this morning
- $\bigstar$  Daily meditation

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- $\bigstar$  Prayer for this evening
- Entrust your prayer
- ★ intentions to our network of monasteries



#### What are the specificities of the diplomacy of the smallest state in the world, the Vatican?

The three principles that characterize the Holy See's diplomacy are working behind the scenes, building connections for dialogue and mediating. For the Holy See's diplomacy dialogue means not competing with the interlocutor or trying to contest it but having absolute independence and objectivity. It means means real mediating by listening.

### How does the Holy See's response to the conflict in Ukraine fit with its general diplomatic approach?

The Holy See's current response is keeping with its traditional diplomatic action in conflict. For instance the pope and his diplomatic team, lead by Cardinal Pietro Parolin [Secretary of State], do not blame any specific party. They also work behind the scenes in order to bring different parties together, without ever engaging in public political analysis or speculation.

I will point for example to the unprecedented visit that Pope Francis made on February 25 to the Russian embassy to the Holy See, from where he talked to Patriarch Kirill. This was all quiet: we heard this unusual trip took place but the Holy See did not really comment. This visit, though, laid the groundwork for what was announced publicly later, on March 16, which was when the Holy Father spoke [through video-call] to Patriarch Kirill. We were given a most complete background of the conversation, with the points exchanged between the two made public to the world. In order to come to this public pressure that came from that conversation, something more discreet had to happen before, which was the unprecedented visit to the Russian embassy.

#### Why is the call between these two religious leaders significant in this context?

Its significant first of all because of the role of the Orthodox Church in Russia. After communism we witnessed a renaissance of Christianity in Russia. For the first time after more than 100 years the Russian Orthodox Church was no longer submitted to the state but working in harmony with it in both domestic and foreign policies. So the Patriarch and the Orthodox Church in Russia have an enormous influence over the state. With this in mind, it is essential to contact and try to exercise influence on the state through the Patriarchate.

How this was built is also very important. This excellent relation that Pope Francis has with Patriarch Kirill today is something that has been building for over 30 years. It all started in 1988 when a big Vatican delegation went to Russia for the Millennial celebration [marking 1000 years of Russian Orthodox Christianity] and they met with President Gorbachev as well. The relationship between the Vatican, Russia and the Orthodox Church has been ongoing for 30 years.

## Has this official call between Francis and Kirill already had wider repercussions?

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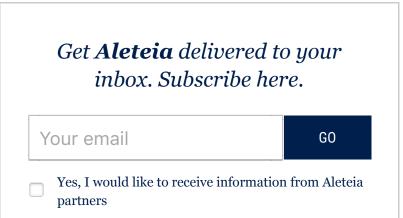


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# Newsletter



Yes, another very important diplomatic element is that, following Pope Francis' virtual meeting with Patriarch Kirill, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, also spoke with the Patriarch. Archbishop Welby expressed almost *verbatim* the same concerns and preoccupations, and emphasized the need for diplomacy.

This is important because the Archbishop of Canterbury works absolutely in tandem with the British Crown and the Office of the Prime Minister. These conversations have several dimensions, as Patriarch Kirill also communicates directly with President Putin. This is one of the characteristics of the Holy See's diplomacy, and in particular that of Pope Francis: engaging multiple religions leaders in order to bring about the same results of peace, preservation of sacraments, humanitarian aid to those feeling war zones and so on. This strategy of Vatican diplomacy could not have been implemented had the pope or the Secretary of State made public bellicose statements.

### In light of Pope Francis' decision to consecrate Russia and Ukraine to the Immaculate Heart of the Virgin Mary, can we say that spirituality is becoming part of the diplomatic tools used by the Vatican?

It's absolutely significant. Russia has already been consecrated to the Virgin Mary by Pope John Paul II in 1984 and then re-emphasized in 1989 at a very important time in the relationship between the Holy See and the government of the Soviet Union.

So why did Pope Francis decide to revisit this now? It has a strong diplomatic value as well as spiritual value. It is at the request of the Roman Catholic bishops of Ukraine, they asked and signed a petition for Francis to do this this beautiful and fascinating thing.

The Roman Catholic Church in Ukraine has been, since independence, pretty much sidelined by the Greek Catholic Church in the country. From the beginning the former has been closer to local and central authorities acquiring more properties. What Pope Francis is doing, in my view of reading the diplomatic nuances, is acknowledging and bringing out the historical value of the Roman Catholic Church, which happened to be of mostly Polish ethnicity in Ukraine.

#### The Holy See has also been providing a lot of humanitarian assistance. How does this fit into the Vatican's diplomacy?

The humanitarian angle has been through Caritas, which is fully engaged in Ukraine and has been from the beginning of the war by distributing food and medicine and so on. Caritas works on the field indiscriminately, it helps everybody and is very well organized. It fulfills many aspects that would otherwise be handled by the United Nations or other international institutions.

Another tool or instrument of the Holy See are the "emissaries" who are sent in the field. They have three dimensions: the humanitarian dimension, the ecumenical dimension and the diplomatic dimension. The ecumenical dimension means they meet with different religious leaders for example. The diplomatic dimension means they communicate and gather information from the field, through missionaries, local leaders etc. They work with ethnic and linguistic maps for example, rather than military ones. This is done in order to get the reality of the situation that is then presented to the pope and his diplomats in Rome and decisions are made from there, to help them make objective decisions.

## Pope Francis sent Cardinals Krajewski and Czerny to Ukraine in the last weeks to show support. What is the significance of this from a diplomatic point of view?

This move is not unprecedented. Pope Francis uses cardinals often to dispatch them to areas for sensitive negotiations or off the record meetings. Although the two cardinals concerned are not diplomats, as they are not part of the Secretariat of State, it is another way that Pope Francis exercises his full and tireless engagement in order to being peace.

#### Would you say the Holy See's diplomacy is unique?

Yes, it stands out as absolutely unique. The Holy See doesn't have military or material interests, it has no trade. The work stems only from the natural law, which is imbued in all of us, of knowing deeply what is good and what is bad. The Holy See acts as independent, totally objective and devoid of interest. It has acquired credibility, as it doesn't lie or mislead. It is credible and trusted, so, yes, unique.

