



Victor Gaetan tells **Ruadhán Jones** about the inner-workings of papal diplomacy and evaluates Pope Francis' contribution

The Catholic Church as an institution has a curious structure. Its foot soldier, the parish priest, is visible in almost every community in Ireland. And yet, as Victor Gaetan tells me, "so much good that the Church does around the world is, by design, unknown to believers, especially those living comfortably in the West".

Mr Gaetan's recent book, *God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy, and America's Armageddon* brings the reader behind the scenes, unveiling exactly that hidden work. Using his experience as a Vaticanista – an expert on the Vatican – as well as material from inside-sources, Mr Gaetan provides valuable insight into the work of God's diplomats, as well as Pope Francis' contribution.

Born in then-communist Romania to a family with Italian lineage, a formative experience for young Victor was the opening of Catholic churches as a result of Vatican diplomacy.

"I remember visiting a small church dedicated to St Anthony of Padua in a mountainous region where my grandmother lived," Mr Gaetan explains. "The community had no priest, but the Church was open and a cantor led the small congregation in hymns that touched my soul. Years later, I had a chance to meet several Vatican diplomats who helped negotiate the agreements in Eastern Europe that led to openings such as the one I experienced. Their humility and great intelligence were so impressive that I began paying special attention to this area of Church activity."

While this sowed the seeds of Mr Gaetan's interest in Vatican diplomacy as such, his desire to write *God's Diplomats* came during a reporting trip to Cuba in 2010.

Programmes

"I ran into valuable programmes run by the Catholic Church, for the elderly, the sick, the poor, young children – but the religious who ran them made me promise not to reveal their activities, to protect them," Mr Gaetan says. "Not because the state had no idea – the state certainly knew – but because technically the Church was not supposed to be playing this charitable role."

"I realised so much good that the Church does around the world, is by design, unknown to believers, especially those living comfortably in the West. These were the seeds of the book."

Papal diplomacy: the



The Chinese national flag flies in front of a Catholic church in Huangtugang, China, in this 2018 photo.

There is often an image that the Church is distant from the reality on the ground. However, nothing could be further from the truth, Mr Gaetan says: "Vatican diplomats posted abroad are deeply involved in the life of the countries where they live. They have two huge assignments: to represent the Holy See to both the host country governments and to the Catholic bishops in the nation. Two very different constituencies!"

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Not long before Mr Gaetan spoke to me, he had interviewed Archbishop Christophe Pierre who is nuncio (Vatican-ese for ambassador) to the US, who, in the last two weeks of September, "spent most of the time on planes and in places far from Washington DC as he attended ordinations, gave speeches, and visited Catholic communities," Mr Gaetan says. "He said his life was 'exhausting', but necessary for him to really have the pulse of the land."

"Imagine how deeply involved in local reality Italian Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli is," Mr Gaetan continues. "He is the apostolic nuncio to Israel, a post created when Israel and the Vatican recognised each other in 1994. Girelli also serves as the apostolic delegate to Jerusalem and Palestine,

underscoring the Holy See's position that Jerusalem should be considered an international city with special status because it has sites sacred to three world religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

"The nuncio has stepped in on occasion to mediate between the Palestinian community (including Muslims and Christians) and Israeli authorities. And he serves as nuncio to Cyprus, thus monitoring another major conflict zone: the island is divided between Greeks and Turks since the Turkish invasion in 1974. Girelli is managing information in multiple conflict zones!"

Fascinating

The first half of *God's Diplomats* details the fascinating history of Vatican diplomacy, tracing its roots right back to the early centuries of the Church's existence and setting the scene for his analysis of Pope Francis' approach to diplomacy. As Europe was converted and Christendom formed, the Church played a key role in dynastic and political settlements, as well as the political formation of many regions. However, it wasn't until 1870 that the modern phase of Vatican diplomacy began, when the Kingdom of Italy completed the country's reunification by stripping Rome from the Holy See, Mr Gaetan explains.

"Pope Pius IX promptly declared himself a prisoner of the Apostolic Palace – a situation that lasted for the next 59 years until the Lateran Treaty was signed [in 1929]," he continues. "Fortuitously, the first pope to cope with dispossession and landlessness for his entire pontificate was a graduate of the Vatican's diplomatic school. Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) understood



Victor Gaetan, author of *God's Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy and America's Armageddon*, is pictured in an undated photo.

diplomacy's potential as he sought to reshape the Church's global mission.

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"Leo cemented the contemporary importance of the Vatican diplomatic corps as the infrastructure of papal influence not only to secular gov-

ernments but to far-flung Catholic parishes throughout the world. The 'captive popes' (1870-1929) did a brilliant job redefining Church power, centralising it in the figure of the pope and forging new roles, valued by other sovereign actors.

"Between 1914 and 1978, every pope had served as a Vatican diplomat before being elevated to the chair of St Peter, and those skills profoundly shaped the exercise of papal leadership in the 20th century."

The second half of the book is devoted to analysing Pope Francis' efforts on the diplomacy scene during his papacy. According to Mr Gaetan, the Pope's views on doctrine and the goals of Vatican diplomacy, especially peace-making are in perfect continu-

Church's political power



Pope Francis greets then US Vice President Joe Biden at the Vatican in this April 29, 2016, file photo. Photos: CNS

ity with the last three pontiffs. What sets him apart is his enthusiasm and his “masterful” operation of the full diplomatic dashboard available to the Supreme Pontiff.

“In the first part of the book, I provide a historical and organisational review of the subject, to really explore the resources that any pope gains upon elevation to St Peter’s throne,” Mr Gaetan says. “Then I look at what prepared Francis to take advantage of these assets and boil it down to his three identities as manager, mystic, and missionary. For decades, Jorge Bergoglio managed Church organisations. At just 36 he was named provincial of Jesuits in Argentina. Later, he served as a leading light in the pan-Latin American conference of bishops, CELAM.

“As I show in seven case studies, Francis builds on initiatives of his predecessors – in China and Cuba, for example. At the same time, he brings new attention to situations in Colombia, Kenya, and South Sudan. People who work with the Pope say he works constantly and tirelessly. Plus, the diplomatic structure is itself an unusually efficient organisation, providing a constant stream of intel from nearly every country in the world. Francis thrives on these inputs, soaking them in every morning. Pope Benedict XVI was more interested in different things. He never visited Asia for example.”

Studies

Through his case studies, Mr Gaetan argues that there have been several success stories in Pope Francis’ papacy. However, when I asked him to pin it down to one, he broadened the question out. Where Pope Francis has been most successful, Mr Gaetan says, is in how he “has shared his wisdom with all of us, believers and non-believers, including his core approach to diplomacy.

“When Francis promotes a culture of encounter, he is suggesting a process through which people, in

good faith, can share ideas and find agreement without losing or giving up their own identity,” he continues. “What the culture of encounter represents is an attitude of open-heartedness toward others, including rivals or opponents. It includes the Pope’s call to ‘go to the margins’ and serve people on social and geographic peripheries. The culture of encounter is meant to describe real encounters with real people. It’s a programme of action, not theory.

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“This approach flows from Christianity itself. At the heart of Catholic faith is the incarnation of God as man; the torture and murder of that innocent man, Jesus Christ; and each believer’s encounter with his life and resurrection through the sacraments, through Scripture, and through the teaching authority of the Church. The reality of God entering human history is not abstract, and the impact of his sacrifice should not be theoretical for the Faithful. The Pope reminds us of that.

“Personally, one of Pope Francis’ ‘rules of thumb’ that I find particularly helpful is that we should start processes, without trying to predict

or control outcomes. By starting an encounter or dialogue or negotiation, we give space for God to step in.”

Theoretician

Though Francis does not play the role of a theoretician, Mr Gaetan discerns a number of hallmarks that could be expanded to a theory, or at least some “rules of thumb”.

“I see three hallmarks of Francis’ approach: commitment to the centrality of personal encounters in problem solving, respect for local perception, and patience. As I studied his diplomatic practice, I distilled five main ‘rules of thumbs’ that he returns to again and again: start processes (that God can finish); initiate encounters with humility and respect; proceed through concrete steps and gestures; allow mutual respect to grow, step by step. But as the nuncio to Spain explains, the culture of encounter is the ‘golden thread’ tying all Pope Francis’ words and actions together,” Mr Gaetan explains.

When it comes to interacting with the big world players, like the US and Russia for example, Pope Francis is “unusually independent”, Mr Gaetan says.

“His birth in Latin America takes him out of the Cold War dynamic that popes since 1948 were implicated in,” Victor suggests. “His assessment of international politics reflects this independence. He practices diplomacy for a multipolar world. He doesn’t consider Russian imperialism any more dangerous than American imperialism.

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“So he dares to offer a critique of Western foreign policy practices and failures, such as the perpetually churning war machines; arrogant ideas like gender ideology and other products of radical individualism being brusquely imposed on traditional, communitarian cultures; and consumerist indifference that sees many as ‘throwaway’ people, such as the elderly and the preborn.

“Regarding Russia, [in *God’s Diplomats*] I trace how, since the fall of Communism and the Soviet Empire, the Holy See has worked diligently to forge new and stronger relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, which has a constructive, collaborative relationship with the Russian government. Like John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Francis is committed to a view that sees Western Christianity as including Russia. Vatican leadership believes Russia is a valuable ally for Europe: it sees relentlessly negative depictions of Vladimir Putin as peculiarly short-sighted. Rome’s approach directly contradicts the American and Western European effort to isolate Russia.”

One diplomatic aspect of Pope Francis’ tenure that has particularly grabbed the world’s attention is the so-called ‘China Deal’. The deal, a 2018 accord with the Communist Chinese government that gave the Pope final say on the appointment of bishops, sought to heal divisions between the underground Church and the government controlled Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA). The deal, which was renewed in 2021, established a formal dialogue with Beijing after decades during which Chinese Catholics faithful to the Pope were largely driven underground.

Mixed reaction

However, it met with mixed reaction both within and outside the Church. I asked Mr Gaetan if he thought the China deal will define Francis’ diplomatic legacy.

“Will a persistent misunderstanding of what the ‘China deal’ represents define Francis’ diplomatic legacy? Certainly not,” he responds emphatically. “The Trump Administration weaponised the China deal to try to cow Francis into backing down as part of its own objective of demonising the Chinese; Francis didn’t blink.

“The agreement signed with Beijing pertains to the selection of bishops and is designed to achieve unity between two communities of Catholics in China. It was essential to preserving the apostolic succession of bishops to preserve the sacraments too. It is mainly an ecclesiastic issue and relates to one of the four key functions of Vatican diplomacy: preservation. The other three are representation, mediation, and evangelisation.

“The Church in China was badly fractured under Mao Zedong. The process of achieving unity will take many years, but Francis, building on initiatives of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has made concrete progress, whereas under his predecessor, progress alternated with setbacks, as different personnel came and went on the scene and the two sides were unable to establish a threshold of trust, essential in diplomacy.

“I think Francis’ real diplomatic skill has been on display in the China case. That doesn’t mean that the Catholic Church hasn’t witnessed real persecution and martyrdom in China. It has. And the Pope and his diplomats are painfully aware of that reality too.”

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Ireland’s own diplomatic relationship with the Vatican has been fraught in the past two decades, as revelations around abuse caused a great deal of strain. Mr Gaetan reached out to sources in Rome before our interview to find out how Francis’ diplomatic practice has affected Irish-Vatican relations.

“According to sources in Rome it was the Irish Government’s willingness to work with Pope Francis that inspired it to re-open its embassy in 2014. Since then, the two ambassadors, Ambassadors Emma Madigan (2014-18) and Derek Hannon (2018-present) have been highly professional. The Holy See and Ireland have also found precious common ground vis-a-vis the environment and human rights – two issues less discussed during Benedict’s pontificate.

“Had Pope Benedict XVI continued in office, the tension between the Irish Government and the Holy See over how the Church handled its history of clerical sexual abuse would probably still characterise the Ireland-Vatican bilateral relationship! Francis, eventually, jumped over that wall.

“Francis got off to a rocky start regarding the breadth and depth of the clerical sexual abuse scandal. He did not take sufficiently seriously corruption around clerical sexual abuse in Chile. Since, he has aggressively corrected his response – and accepted responsibility for the ‘catastrophe’ of this crisis. What he said last year about victims in France applies just as strongly to victims in Ireland: ‘It is also my shame, our shame, my shame, for the incapacity of the Church for too long to put them at the centre of its concerns.’”

📖 Victor Gaetan’s new book *God’s Diplomats: Pope Francis, Vatican Diplomacy, and America’s Armageddon*, published by Rowman & Littlefield, is available online and in stores.