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THE QUIET DIPLOMACY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI: UNCREDITED PAPAL ACHIEVEMENTS

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Abstract: Few scholars or journalists have highlighted Pope Benedict XVI's accomplishments in international diplomacy, 2005-2013, for at least three reasons: his predecessor's overwhelming list of global achievement overshadowed the German pope's record; a misleading caricature of Josef Ratzinger portrayed him as an introverted theologian disengaged from worldly matters; and even some curial colleagues assumed Benedict did not prioritize international relations as seen, for example, in his failure to visit any Asian country. However, every pope is necessarily a diplomat as sovereign of the world's smallest state with 1.4 billion citizens-members of the Catholic Church. In fact, under Pope Benedict's leadership, meaningful gains were made in improving ecumenical relations with the Orthodox Church of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church; strengthening ties with Shia leaders in Iran; and advancing bilateral relations with Vietnam, China, and Russia. Exploring these cases offers greater insight into the functionality of papal diplomacy.

Keywords: Diplomacy; Pope Benedict XVI; Catholic Church

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LA DIPLOMACIA SILENCIOSA DEL PAPA BENEDICTO XVI: LOGROS PAPALES NO RECONOCIDOS

Resumen: Pocos académicos o periodistas han destacado los logros del Papa Benedicto XVI en diplomacia internacional entre 2005 y 2013, por al menos tres razones: la abrumadora lista de logros globales de su predecesor eclipsó el historial del Papa alemán; una caricatura engañosa de Josef Ratzinger lo retrató como un teólogo introvertido, desconectado de los asuntos mundanos; e incluso algunos colegas de la curia asumieron que Benedicto no priorizó las relaciones internacionales, como se vio, por ejemplo, en su omisión de visitar ningún país asiático. Sin embargo, todo Papa es necesariamente un diplomático como soberano del estado más pequeño del mundo, con 1.400 millones de ciudadanos: miembros de la Iglesia Católica. De hecho, bajo el liderazgo del Papa Benedicto, se lograron avances significativos en la mejora de las relaciones ecuménicas con la Iglesia Ortodoxa de Constantinopla y la Iglesia Ortodoxa Rusa; el fortalecimiento de los lazos con los líderes chiítas en Irán; y el avance de las relaciones bilaterales con Vietnam, China y Rusia. Explorar estos casos ofrece una mayor comprensión de la funcionalidad de la diplomacia papal.

Palabras clave: diplomacia; Papa Benedicto XVI; Iglesia Católica

I. Introduction

Josef Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI in April 2005, is widely recognized as a great theologian, so dedicated to his field that, during his eight-year pontificate, he published three encyclicals and a best-selling trilogy on Jesus Christ's life and ministry, *Jesus of Nazareth*. Often overlooked are Benedict's accomplishments in diplomacy. The 2021 biography, *Benedict XVI: A Life (Volume Two): Professor and Prefect to Pope and Pope Emeritus 1966–The Present*, written by Ratzinger's German friend, journalist Peter Seewald, gives scant attention to this subject: the word "diplomacy" does not even appear in the book's index. Supporting the assumption that international relations was not a papal strength was the

global firestorm provoked by Benedict's September 2006 speech at Regensburg University on Islam, suggesting it is a violent religion. Even insiders muttered that the unforced error was inevitable, considering the pope appointed a Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, with minimal international experience despite job requirements that include global engagement almost daily.

Yet, meaningful diplomatic breakthroughs were accomplished under Benedict XVI's reign, and his personal engagement was crucial in each case. By reviewing examples of significant foreign policy achievements between April 2005 and February 2013, we also gain insight into the unique diplomatic role each pope plays based on his interests and personal profile even as the Holy See's diplomatic apparatus functions continuously, regardless of which pope is in charge.

The cases I highlight pertain to improved ecumenical relations with the Orthodox Church of Constantinople and the Russian Orthodox Church; beneficial ties with Shia leadership in Iran; and stronger bilateral relations with Vietnam, China, and Russia. With Iran, especially in the first four years of his papacy, Benedict engaged with the country to rebuff US-led threats over its nuclear arsenal. Benedict met with Vietnam's prime minister at the Vatican in 2007, laying the ground for appointment of a non-resident papal envoy to Hanoi in 2011. The pope's letter to Chinese Catholics in 2007 signaled a dramatic new understanding of the Catholic Church in China, where some 12 million people practice the faith. The Holy See and Russia achieved full diplomatic relations in 2009. In each case, the Vatican in no way changed its position under Benedict's leadership but his identity and humility benefitted Church diplomacy in significant ways.

II. Ecumenical Relations

Against expectation, Pope Benedict XVI achieved diplomatic breakthroughs impossible for his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. In ecumenical relations, Benedict's authority as a renowned theologian, his sapient personality, and the happenstance of German birth combined to make him an unusually effective advocate for Christian unity. In his eight-year reign, more was done to overcome historical ruptures with other

Christians, namely Protestants and Orthodox, than ever before.

Two very different trends drive the main motives for ecumenicism: a secularizing trend that tends to marginalize, diminish, or even deny Christianity's relevance, on one hand, and a marked increase in violence against Christian churches and believers, on the other. Pope John Paul II was well aware of the first trend and feared the second. Pope Benedict XVI governed as both negative realities, in the Church's eyes, settled onto the world, compelling a coordinated response.

The groundwork for Benedict's accomplishments was laid fifty years ago, as a result of the Second Vatican Council, but it took Pope Benedict's push to institutionalize efforts in ways that continued after his resignation.

He began his pontificate with a solid, existing "policy" basis for pursuing an ecumenical strategy, meaning, an effort to bring Christian churches and denominations together theologically as well as strategically. The contemporary Catholic Church is profoundly shaped by the Second Vatican Council convened in the early 1960s (in which young Ratzinger participated) to rethink how the Church did business. One of Vatican II's key documents, *Unitatis Redintegratio* (Restoration of Unity), approved in 1964 by a vote of 2,137 bishops to 11, describes "restoration of unity among all Christians" as a key long-term goal (Vatican II 1964). Evidence of the dramatic new outlook is reflected in the document's term for baptized Christians professing faith in another church: "separated brethren" replaced "heretics."

To melt a prime historical point of conflict between the two branches of Christianity that split in 1054, mutual excommunications of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Church leaders — Pope Leo IX in Rome excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople in the east, Michael Cerularius, who countered with an excommunication of the Pope, rupturing the Church into East and West — were cancelled in 1964, thereby allowing inter-church dialogue to begin in the modern era.

III. Pope John Paul II's Dream

Pope John Paul II revived the ecumenical objective. One of his 14 Papal encyclics, *Ut Unim Sint* (That They May Be One), issued in May 1995,

elaborated the program and described its Biblical basis. He made specific inroads with several Protestant denominations: allowing former Episcopal priests to become Catholic priests and accepting some Episcopal parishes into the Catholic Church as well as signing a joint declaration with the Lutheran World Federation settling a key point of doctrinal difference (John Paul II 1995).

John Paul II became the first Pope to visit a majority Orthodox country, Romania, in 1999, where he was accompanied for three days by Romanian Orthodox Patriarch Teoctist.[1] Later, he went to Orthodox Bulgaria, Georgia, Ukraine, and Greece. But he was never able to achieve his dream of engineering a personal meeting with Russian Orthodox Patriarch, Alexey II, who took office in 1990.

Despite years of negotiations and a variety of trial balloons on location options and meeting configurations floated by the Vatican, Alexey resisted John Paul II's charm. Such a meeting was impossible during the first 13 years of John Paul's pontificate, when the Soviet Union existed. The Polish Pope was perceived as a troublemaker and anti-Communist agitator.

To Pope John Paul's chagrin, even after the collapse of Communism — which allowed religious revival and contact for all the suppressed faiths of the former Soviet empire — four major areas of tension between Catholics and Orthodox conspired to lock the pontiff out: 1) Catholic property claims against the Russian state, which had brutally expropriated, repurposed, or destroyed thousands of churches, monasteries, and ecclesiastic buildings during the Soviet era, in some cases turning Catholic properties over to the Orthodox Church; 2) Orthodox fears that Catholics and other missionary churches would sweep into Russia to proselytize and woe believers; 3)

[1] In the Orthodox hierarchy, patriarchs have tremendous authority over believers under their jurisdiction. For most, territorial authority covers an entire country, as well as nationals living in other countries. No one patriarch is superior to another —that's a key difference with Catholicism, and the main stumbling block to reunification— although the "first among equals" is the Patriarch of Constantinople, based in Istanbul, considered the spiritual leader of all Orthodox believers. But the powerhouse church in terms of believers and political clout is the Russian Orthodox Church, led by the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. With approximately 101 million members, the Russian Orthodox Church comprises the largest national constituent of the 260 million[1] Eastern Orthodox believers around the world.

centuries of Polish-Russian rivalry; and 4) Missteps at the Vatican in how it structured new Catholic administrative units in Russia.

Relations between the Roman Catholic and Russian Orthodox Churches reached a real low in 2002 when Russia barred a Polish Catholic bishop from returning to Siberia where he was rebuilding — and governing — the largest diocese in the world. Several other Catholic priests were expelled or barred as well. The Vatican's Apostolic Administrator for European Russia, Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz (himself an ethnic Pole from Belarus) complained, "An organized campaign is being waged against the Catholic Church in Russia."

Confirming that things were bad, *The Guardian* called it an "ugly and bitter feud" and observed that "relations between the Vatican and the Orthodox hierarchy, always tense, are going from bad to worse" (*The Guardian* 2002). What repaired this brokenness, eventually, was the ascension of Benedict XVI in April 2005.

IV. Benedict Takes Over

In his first papal message to his former peers, assembled in the Sistine Chapel, Benedict announced:

> [T]he current Successor assumes as his primary commitment that of working tirelessly towards the reconstitution of the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. This is his ambition; this is his compelling duty. He is aware that to do so, expressions of good feelings are not enough. (Benedict XVI 2005a)

On his first papal trip, in Germany in August 2005, Benedict met with an assembly of German evangelicals and Protestants and offered his most specific vision of what ecumenism looks like, rejecting the idea that institutions are the focal point of dialogue or that it requires denying one's own faith history. Ecumenism "does not mean uniformity in all expressions of theology and spirituality, in liturgical forms and in discipline. Unity in multiplicity, and multiplicity in unity…It is obvious that this dialogue can develop only in a context of sincere and committed spirituality."

The pope ended his talk with a picturesque observation: "Now let us all go along this path in the awareness that walking together is a form of unity" (2005b). It was as though Benedict the inquisitor had thrown off the doctrinal cape he had to wear as leader of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (charged with policing issues ranging from polygamy [*Catholic News Agency* 2009a] to exorcism), to reveal his authentic self, Benedict the mystical theologian.

In 2006, the Vatican was organizing Benedict's first papal visit to a majority Muslim country, Turkey. The purpose was to meet with Bartholomew I, Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, for the feast of St Andrew — the Apostle who founded the Eastern Orthodox Church some 2,000 years before. Because the speech he gave in Regensburg was still provoking public protest in the Muslim world, many counseled Benedict to cancel the trip, since it was bound to produce nasty images of angry Muslim protesters. Just two days before he arrived, 25,000 people demonstrated against him in the streets of Istanbul (Traynor 2006).

But Benedict quelled the noise. Perhaps for the first time, he proved to have the dramatic sensibility that his predecessor possessed in abundance: the Vatican daringly added a public centerpiece to the trip, a visit to the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, known as the Blue Mosque, making Benedict the second pope in history to enter a Muslim holy place.[2]

As the pontiff entered the *musallah* accompanied by Mustafa Çağrıcı, the Mufti of Istanbul and Emrullah Hatipoğlu, the mosque's imam, he leaned down and removed his cardinal red loafers. Standing next to Mufti Çağrıcı, facing Mecca, with hands clasped, eyes half-closed, and lips faintly reciting a prayer, Benedict flipped public opinion in that one minute with his respectful attitude, a demonstration of his concept of "mutual love" in action.[3]

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[2] John Paul II visited the Omayyad Mosque in Syria in 2001.

[3] The phrase "mutual love," which guides the church's posture on inter-faith relations is prominently used in the paper "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," written under the guidance of Cardinal Ratzinger and released in December 1999 to mark the new millennium. Among the historical mistakes recognized are the separation of the church into two branches in 1054 and the splintering of the faith during the Protestant Reformation. To cure division requires "mutual love" according to the text.

Benedict met with Patriarch Bartholomew under tight Turkish police security. In a glittering evening prayer service at the modest Church of St George — a church not marked by a cross due to Turkish restrictions on religion — Bartholomew greeted the pontiff as a "beloved brother" and Benedict framed his response with the 133rd psalm, "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity". The two spoke at length about the ecumenical mission, mainly to promote peace through love.

Together, they prayed before relics of St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory of Nazianzus, former bishops revered by both churches. The relics had been taken to Rome during the Fourth Crusade, in 1204, when Constantinople was captured. Five months before his death, Pope John Paul II had them delivered back to the Patriarchy of Constantinople.

The next day, they signed a common statement and appeared together, clasped hands held aloft. Although Bartholomew presides over a minute, beleaguered local Orthodox community with fewer than 3,000 believers in Istanbul — and since the Turkish government padlocked the country's only seminary in 1971 making it impossible to cultivate young leaders — the Patriarch of Constantinople is a towering symbol of Eastern Orthodox spirituality, making this picture of unity set in Byzantium a dramatic sign of progress.

V. Joint Theological Commission Revived

Even more substantive, the statement expresses "profound joy" (Benedict XVI 2006) that a joint Catholic-Orthodox theological commission comprised of 30 experts from both Churches had reconvened in 2006 after a six-year hiatus. The panel was created in 1979 by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew's predecessor, Dimitrios I but was derailed in the early 2000s ostensibly over the status of Byzantine-rite Churches, also known as Uniate Churches, that maintain the Orthodox liturgy but are loyal to the pope — a historic hybrid that emerged between

the late 1500s and mid-1700s and was brutally suppressed under Communism.[4]

Patriarch Bartholomew visited Rome several times after Benedict's pilgrimage to the Phanar, each occasion a step toward reconciliation. In June 2008, the Patriarch participated in a Mass in St Peter's Basilica where the two men recited the Nicene Creed together in Greek, leaving out a three-word phrase ("and the son") known as the "Filioque Clause" that the Orthodox don't accept. The dispute pertains to the Holy Spirit, but more recently — and this theological conflict dates back to the eighth century — experts view it as a power dispute over who gets to make decisions, Rome or Constantinople. Benedict showed that the Catholics can overcome a doctrinal point as a living act — even before any paperwork is signed.

The most significant development in deepening East-West Orthodox dialogue, though, was the ascension in January 2009 of a new Russian Orthodox leader, Patriarch Kirill, and the opening of Russia to Rome.

VI. Relations with Russian Orthodox Church

During their stunning meeting in 1989, John Paul II and the Soviet Union's President Mikhail Gorbachev announced the establishment of diplomatic relations between Moscow and the Vatican and the first envoys were exchanged in 1990 for the first time since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. But it was a state-to-state relationship, not yet sanctioned by the Russian Patriarch, and the Soviet Union disappeared in 1991 (Gaetan 2025). Seven Russian envoys served at the Holy See since.

Upon the death of Alexey II in December 2008, Metropolitan Kirill was elected Patriarch. For twenty years, he had served as Chairman of the Russian Orthodox Church's Department for External Relations, the Church's "foreign minister," so he was the Vatican's main post-communist

[4] These "hybrid" denominations emerged in the 17th century especially in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, when the emperor demanded religious fealty to the Catholic Church but allowed local populations to maintain their style of worship. Among the most persecuted churches under Communism, the revival of the Byzantine-rite Catholic Churches in the 1990s was the source of some disturbance especially in former Communist countries that did not want to hear their claims for expropriated property.

interlocutor and known by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Kirill, age 78, is a sophisticated man with deep standing at home. His father and grandfather (who was arrested by the Soviets in 1933 for capitalizing the word "God") were Orthodox priests, as is his brother, a theology professor; his mother was a German language teacher. In 1971, Kirill was posted to Geneva to serve as the Russian Orthodox Church's representative to the World Council of Churches, the preeminent global ecumenical forum founded in 1948 with some 350 Christian member churches, though the Catholic Church chose observer status.

Kirill and Benedict shared an analysis of the risks threatening the West. They both believed that Western culture depends on its Christian foundation for the precepts of virtue, which guarantee freedom. For these men, who lived through totalitarian and authoritarian oppression, rampant secularism and moral collapse signal a dangerous instability that can invite new forms of tyranny. They are also wary of radical Islam, and its threat to minority Christian populations around the world.

Of course, Patriarch Kirill advanced his ideas from a position of strength: The Russian Orthodox Church experienced a renaissance after the collapse of Communism.[5] It also became closely allied with political power, giving the Church muscle and relevance. As cooperation began to flourish under the Church leaders — the Vatican sponsored a "Day of Russian Culture and Spirituality;" the Orthodox countered by organizing a concert dedicated to Benedict — political relations between the Russian state and Vatican City also gained ground.

Not only did warmth between the churches facilitate this agreement, but continuous cordial relations between President Vladimir Putin and Pope Benedict paved the way. They met at the Vatican in March 2007, conversing in the pontiff's native language. Putin speaks German fluently, because he learned it at home and lived in Dresden for several years while working for the KGB (Gray 2024). During the visit, according to a U.S. Embassy cable

[5] "In 1987 there were only three monasteries in Russia; today [2009] there are 478. Then there were just two seminaries; now there are 25. Most striking is the explosion of churches, from about 2,000 in Gorbachev's time to nearly 13,000 today. The Russian Orthodox Church has grown into a sprawling institution, with dozens of publishing houses and hundreds of thriving journals, newspapers, and websites" (Schmemann 2009).

released through Wikileaks, Putin pledged his government would "do all it can to favor dialogue between the two churches." Two years later, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev (2008-2012) and Benedict met in Rome and announced the imminent exchange of ambassadors as a result of full diplomatic recognition between the two countries (*AsiaNews* 2009).

Despite wars, historically, German-Russian relations have been marked by mutual respect, even admiration. Several Tzars were ethnic Germans. Poland (Catholic) and Russia (Orthodox), on the other hand, have been enemies for centuries. Thus, under John Paul II and Benedict respectively, the coincidence of birth both delayed and advanced diplomacy.

VII. A Catholic-Orthodox Breakthrough in Poland

Because the Vatican influences the attitudes of Catholic Churches around the world, the newfound communication between Rome and Moscow influenced relations between the Catholic Church in Poland and the Russian Orthodox. In 2012, recommended by Benedict, the Roman Catholic bishops of Poland and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch signed a joint message urging people of both nations to join them in pursuit of reconciliation, premised on overcoming "mutual prejudice." It was the first time a Russian patriarch had ever visited modern Poland, and it was an event of great public interest, even broadcast live on Polish TV.

The joint statement, in the works for three years, mimics language used by the Vatican in describing the Great Schism as a historical mistake:

> Sin, which is the principal source of all divisions, human frailty, individual and collective egoism as well as political pressure, led to mutual alienation, overt hostility and even struggle between our nations… Similar circumstances had earlier led to the dissolution of the original Christian unity. Division and schism, alien to Christ's will, were a major scandal; therefore, we redouble efforts to bring our churches and nations closer to each other and to become more credible witnesses to the Gospel in the contemporary world. (Michalik and Cyril 2012)

Pope Benedict promoted this pact because it demonstrates the relevance of churches in modeling positive behavior. The Russian invasion of Ukraine chilled relations between the Vatican and Moscow but Pope Francis bent over backwards to avoid villainizing the Russian Orthodox Church in order to protect progress made toward mutual respect under his two predecessors. Although, reflecting on a Zoom call he had with Kirill soon after the invasion, the pope remembered the patriarch as having read a long list of reasons for the war. Francis observed, Kirill should not become "Putin's altar boy" (Glatz 2022).

VIII. Benedict and Iran's Shia Leadership

Iran and the Holy See established diplomatic relations in 1954 — sustaining ties despite the 1979 Islamic revolution. Although not much publicized, the Islamic Republic of Iran prioritized engagement with Christian church leadership beginning in 1992, when Shia clerics held the first inter-faith meeting, in Athens, with the Greek Orthodox Church.[6] Although the Greek community in Iran is miniscule (the Armenian Apostolic Church, part of the Oriental Orthodox family, is the largest Christian church), Iranian thinkers admire the Orthodox for maintaining traditional values and identity in the face of Western-driven globalism (*The Soul of the East* 2014). In 1985, in the midst of the devastating Iran-Iraq war, the first western theologian invited to exchange views with Muslim counterparts was the controversial Swiss Catholic priest, Hans Küng. He was impressed to see ayatollahs, state officials, and even family members of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Komeini, attend his seminar: "'Instead of dispute, dialogue.' This is the astounding phrase that I heard in Tehran. I am convinced it is primarily religiously motivated, that it will persist…and that it will bear fruit", wrote Küng (1985).

Enthusiasm for dialog with Christians in formal settings did persist. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization sponsored its first discussions with the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (Dicastery

[6] The meeting was, in fact, organized by Mohammad Khatani, five years before he became president.

for Interreligious Dialogue, n.d.) and the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1995. The Iranian government created several entities dedicated to inter-faith research and discussion. One, the International Center for Dialogue Among Cultures and Civilizations, was President Mohammad Khatami's (1997-2005) antidote to Samuel Huntington's anticipated clash of civilizations. After he stepped down as president, Khatami served as the center's director. Inter-faith dialogue with well-established institutions like the Vatican (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue 2008), WCC, and Russian Orthodox Church continued under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) — dialogue encouraged by Pope Benedict, despite demonization of Ahmadinejad in the West.

On December 27, 2006, Pope Benedict met privately with a high-level Iranian delegation including Foreign Minister Mottaki, who handed the pope a letter from President Ahmadinejad (Reuters 2006). The Vatican did not reveal the letter's contents, but it could not have been a coincidence that four days earlier, the United Nations Security Council voted unanimously to impose sanctions on Iran for "failure to halt uranium enrichment" (United Nations Security Council 2006).

A U.S. State Department cable from Vatican City, revealed through Wikileaks, shows how closely the American government studied Vatican diplomacy on this matter. A foreign service officer observed, "In light of the Holy See's interest in dialogue with Islam (…) Wednesday's meeting — more than the typical pull-aside for a Foreign Minister, but less than a full papal audience — was a compromise for the Vatican. It is significant that the pope did not invite the FM into the papal apartments but saw him in the much less formal Paul VI Hall" (American Embassy Vatican 2006).

The cable's author also noted that Church officials seek to maintain open lines of communication, explaining, "They are concerned that the cultural and religious exchanges that the Holy See enjoys with Iran could suffer under such [travel] bans - these being the main instruments by which the Vatican tries to influence the regime and society." Not surprisingly, a secular government ascribed short term motives to an institution with a much longer intellectual horizon.

As a theologian, Benedict was highly aware of an intriguing school of thought, that sees Shia Islam as close in keyways to Christianity, especially in practice if not in dogma. In Iran, religious authority is far more centralized

than in Sunni-majority countries: the Supreme Leader is elected from the Assembly of Experts, comprised of some 80 ayatollahs popularly elected from 30 districts to eight-year terms. The system is analogous to the Orthodox and Catholic systems of selecting patriarchs and popes. Shia imams are considered signs of God, giving them the power to intercede between the faithful and heaven.

As well, many Christians share with Shia Muslims devotion to a central mother figure: Mary, mother of Jesus plays a similar role to Fatima (known as al-Zahra, the Shining One), daughter of Muhammad, wife of Imam Ali, and mother of Imam Hussein. Imam Hussein, Muhammad's grandson (and son of Imam Ali, who Shia faithful believe was the Prophet's rightful successor, the core historical disagreement with Sunnis) was brutally martyred at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD. Every year, Shia commemorate Hussein's sacrifice on the holy day of Asura. In Iran, some flagellate themselves to suffer as Hussein did. Hussein's death and Asura echo Jesus Christ's sacrifice and crucifixion (O'Mahony 2006). These similarities create a foundation of mutual respect between Catholic and Shia scholars.

Less than five months after Pope Benedict's meeting with Mottaki, he met at the Vatican with Iran's president between 1997 and 2005, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, who also sat down with Secretary of State Bertone and Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States (comparable to the Vatican's foreign minister). Although the subject was ostensibly "dialogue between cultures" according to the Vatican (Catholic News Agency 2007), Benedict also took the opportunity to speak out on behalf of the Iranian government regarding nuclear power, saying the country has the right to develop this resource for peaceful purposes, as a source of energy. He added that Iran practices religious freedom (*Hindustan Times* 2007), a fact not often mentioned by the Western press, which was following Washington, DC's lead in fomenting anti-Iranian propaganda at the time.

The Holy See does not pursue a transactional form of diplomacy, but the positive relations it establishes with other nations winds up benefitting specific inter-state problems, especially between nations more at war than at peace such as the US and Iran during this period.

A diplomatic coup was achieved in 2011 when Ahmadinejad relied on two senior American bishops to negotiate the successful release in of two

Californians, jailed two years before as spies after they drifted into Iran from Iraq on a misbegotten hiking trip (Erdbrink and Shapira 2011). Rev. John Bryson Chane, former Episcopal Bishop of Washington, DC (2002-2011) and Theodore McCarrick, former Archbishop of Washington DC (2001-2006), worked on the clemency agreement for over a year. McCarrick says he got involved after the U.S. State Department sent family members to him, having "run out of channels" (interview with the author, Hyattsville, MD, October 20, 2015). Bishop Chane already had top contacts among the Iranian elite: In 2008, he became the only American to meet Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Inskeep 2009).

For Catholics, the doctrinal foundation that explains the open-hearted attitude toward Islam is grounded in the Second Vatican Council, when it was codified that the Catholic Church believes Christians and Muslims worship the same, merciful God, who judges humans and rewards the just. The 1965 encyclical Nostra Aetate virtually ordered the faithful to turn from past prejudice to see Islam in a new, positive way (Paul VI 1965). Quietly, Catholic clerics and Shia scholars were meeting in Iran's holiest cities of Qom and Najaf in 2012 as part of ongoing dialogue, encouraged by Benedict and John Paul I as well (Gaetan 2014).

The fact that Benedict prioritized relations with other faith communities, including Shia in Iran at a time when the country's leadership was being castigated by Western governments, also laid the ground for Francis, who similarly gave special attention to religious leaders, especially in the Muslim world (Winfield and Tarigan 2024). Benedict had already dedicated significant attention to strengthening ties with Iran's Shia leadership, which has wide influence on Shia communities across the globe.

IX. Vietnam

To an annual gathering in 2008 of diplomats accredited to the Holy See, Pope Benedict described diplomacy as "the art of hope" (Benedict XVI 2008). It's an attitude that helps explain the Church's ability to pursue a relationship for decades, despite seemingly slow progress.

With the Communist takeover of Saigon in 1975, the party issued severe new rules against the Catholic Church. Property was confiscated; schools

and seminaries were shuttered; processions, gatherings, and public expressions of faith were prohibited; foreign priests were expelled; and religious orders were forbidden. Some one million Vietnamese fled the country, including many Catholics. But most clergy remained, despite imprisonment and harassment (Pham 2015). Mass was not forbidden, and churches remained open.

In 1989, the Vietnamese Bishops Conference, most certainly with full approval of the government, invited a Vatican representative to visit. Pope John Paul II sent as his envoy, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, head of the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace. After a two-week visit, the cardinal returned to Rome, extoling the dedication of the country's Catholic community, then comprising about 6 million people (*UCA News* 1989). A year later, Etchegaray returned for the funeral Mass of the country's only cardinal. Thus began an opening which saw annual visits to Vietnam by Vatican officials — but not much progress toward full diplomatic relations under John Paul II, possibly because the country's leadership was leery of the pope's anti-Communist credentials. Although, upon the pope's death, Hanoi set up locations where local Catholics could view the funeral live (American Embassy Vatican 2007).

Handling the Vietnam portfolio for John Paul II and then Benedict XVI was an exceptional undersecretary for relations with states, Monsignor Pietro Parolin, who served in that position from November 2002 to August 2009, when he was sent to Venezuela to serve as nuncio. (Since October 2013, Parolin served as Pope Francis's secretary of state and continues under Pope Leo XIV to date.) Parolin was particularly dedicated to improving relations between the Holy See and the Church in Vietnam as well as China, countries which broke relations with the Holy See in, respectively, 1975 and 1951.

In the first year of Benedict's pontificate, momentum accelerated. In July 2005, a delegation from Vietnam's Government Committee for Religious Affairs, led by a deputy prime minister, spent a week at the Vatican meeting officials and visiting Rome. Parolin served as host together with the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, led by Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe. A phrase mentioned by the delegation summarizes well the modus operandi that the Church in Vietnam practiced, and the government accepted: "Live according to the Gospel, serving the Motherland and the

Nation". One of the events in which they participated was a Mass in St. Peter's Basilica where Pope Benedict anointed 32 metropolitan archbishops including the archbishop of Hanoi (Embassy of Socialist Republic of Vietnam in the USA 2005).

Four months later, Cardinal Sepe appeared in Hanoi, where he ordained 57 new priests (*Agenzia Fides* 2005).

In January 2007, Vietnam's prime minister, Nguyen Tan Dung, led a delegation to Rome where he met with the pope, the first government leader to do so since the creation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Vatican described the meeting as a "new and important step" (*BBC News* 2007) Among the specifics discussed was the establishment of a Vietnam-Holy See Joint Working Group, which held its first meeting in Hanoi in February 2009. The first visit of a Vietnamese president to the Vatican occurred ten months later (*Catholic News Agency* 2009b).

The culmination of high-level meetings, in-country visits — between 1989 and 2011, the Holy See sent 17 delegations (Phuong 2011) to visit Catholic parishes — and increased freedom for the Church in Vietnam was the appointment in January 2011 of a non-resident papal representative, Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, already serving as apostolic nuncio to Singapore and apostolic delegate to Malaysia (*Catholic News Agency* 2011). Although it was under discussion for years, and theoretically approved in 2008, Pope Benedict announced the appointment during his annual speech to diplomats representing their countries before the Holy See (Benedict XVI 2011).

Just a few weeks before his historic resignation, Benedict and his top diplomats met with Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary, Nguyen Phu Trong, giving him and his large delegation a formal greeting normally reserved for heads of state (Rome Reports 2013). It was yet more evidence of the priority Benedict gave to Vietnam and his commitment to respectful dialogue as the most effective form of diplomacy.

With all the communication between Vietnam and the Vatican under Pope Benedict, what prevented the achievement of full diplomatic relations, which continued to elude the Vatican under Francis (although a breakthrough was achieved in December 2023 when a permanent resident apostolic envoy was named)? One plausible explanation is the fact that Vietnam did not want to get too far ahead of its neighbor China, which has

maintained its own complex negotiations with the Holy See under John Paul II, Benedict, and Francis. What allowed Vietnam to go further, however, is the fact that Catholics represent a larger percentage of the national population, and the Communist Party never created a parallel church structure to rival the Catholic Church led by the pope as did the Chinese in 1957 when the party created the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA).

X. Reconciliation in China

Pope John Paul II was fascinated by China and sought out missionaries who had spent time in the Middle Kingdom, which reopened in 1982 with publication of the Communist Party's position on religion, in response to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution: "The basic policy the Party has adopted toward the religious question is that of respect for and protection of the freedom of religious belief" (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China 1982). What the pope was especially concerned to learn about was the nature of the "official church," members of the patriotic association, its bishops and clergy. Were they schismatic or did they believe in the universal church, led by the Holy Father in Rome?

Based on a multiplication of briefings, Pope John Paul II concluded over time there was one Church in China, united in its devotion to the vicar of Christ but divided when it came to accommodating invasive state demands. Church leadership, especially, pursued divergent strategies for coping with the Communist Party and its controlling worldview. One community registered with the state. Its priests received regular salaries as well as help with church upkeep. This official Church ran seminaries, where many foreign priests were invited to teach; its clergy had more chances to travel and study abroad. The unregistered, or underground, Church, often in rural areas, ignored official structures. The downside to independence was often weak seminary training and catechism. Without doubt, many bishops and clergy in the defiant community were heroic in standing for religious freedom.

As time passed, differences blurred between the two communities, official and unofficial. There were many cases of bishops making public

concessions to the state while quietly communicated with the Holy See, even gaining secret approval for their ordination. Between priests in the respective communities, friendly relations were increasingly the rule. Yet, the existence of a clique of "patriotic" bishops who would regularly show up at the ordinations of jointly endorsed bishops (meaning, endorsed by both Beijing and Rome), wreaking havoc, was evidence that the Catholic Church in China was irregular in debilitating ways.

As clever as the Polish pope was in trying to influence Chinese officials — including, encouraging Mother Teresa to try to plant communities in the mainland (Gaetan 2016) — Beijing simply did not trust John Paul II, and it held on to evidence that he was untrustworthy.

For example, the two sides clashed over the canonization of Chinese saints. For John Paul II, sainthood was a favorite evangelizing tool but there were no Chinese saints. So, on October 1, 2000, in St. Peter's Square, the pope elevated to sainthood 120 martyrs (87 ethnic Chinese and 33 European missionaries) who died in China for the faith between 1648 and 1930. This incurred the regime's wrath because the ceremony was held on China's National Day, fifty-one years after the founding of the People's Republic (*Tampa Bay Times* 2000). It also happened to be the feast day of St. Theresa of Lisieux, patron saint of missions, but the Chinese government launched a harsh media campaign focusing on the sins of foreign missionaries.

Thus, a major obstacle to progress under Pope John Paul II's pontificate was the Holy See's propensity to forget to give China a "heads-up" on decisions or events pertaining to China, let alone consult with government officials on those decisions. The task of finding a way to work with China passed to Benedict XVI.

Pope Benedict XVI did not signal any changes in Vatican diplomatic strategy regarding China, but he approved small respectful gestures toward the government and toward the sanctioned church. Parolin invited bishops aligned with the patriotic association to a prestigious world synod of bishops in Rome. Three of the four invitations went to official bishops while one went to an underground leader. Despite the government blocking all four from the synod in the end, the offer helped thaw relations. Parolin confirmed to US diplomats in August 2005 that "informal, unofficial dialogue" with China was underway, while cautioning that specific breakthroughs would take time (American Embassy Vatican 2005).

In June 2006, a mission by Msgr. Gianfranco Rota Graziosi, a China specialist and Vatican diplomat, and Archbishop Claudio Celli, another trained diplomat who served as undersecretary for relations with states (1990–1995), embarked to Beijing for mid-level talks, attracting international media attention because it was the first public evidence in about five years that the Vatican and Beijing were still negotiating (Rosenthal 2006). Yet it was a tentative move, mainly just to open a channel. Meanwhile, the government continued sponsoring Church infrastructure by opening the nation's largest seminary under the patriotic association's control.

In January 2007, Parolin convened an internal summit on the Church in China, bringing top Catholic China hands, from cardinals down to missionaries, to Rome. At the assembly, participants were each given a binder with a draft letter from Benedict to Chinese Catholics — a document begun under the Polish pope. As the meeting ended, the binders were collected before anyone could leave. On the Feast of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, the Holy See publicly released the "Letter of Pope Benedict XVI, to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons, and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China". The letter described the goal for all Chinese believers as growing in unity (Benedict XVI 2007).

Yet it did not back down from the central disagreement with secular authorities: the unity of a universal Church is assured through the apostolic succession of bishops "in visible and concrete communion with the Pope." Rather than being received as a gauntlet thrown, the Chinese government accelerated discussions, and for the next two years, all episcopal ordinations were jointly managed.

The letter was the most important gesture toward China of Benedict XVI's papacy, with both diplomatic and spiritual weight. It was a charitable, theologically grounded presentation of the problem of having two communities of faithful coexisting, cooperating in some places and at each other's throats in others. It is a sophisticated document, conceptualized from a vista of sympathy and wisdom, written with great clarity, and animated by generosity, yet bluntly repudiating the patriotic association, named in a footnote as "incompatible with Catholic doctrine."

The letter reminded the faithful that to be part of the body of Christ requires communion and dedication to unity. It reassured the government

that Church teaching "invites the faithful to be good citizens," with no "mission to change the structure or the administration of the State," while asserting the expectation that religious freedom will be respected. It articulated some of the specific problems attached to having two communities within one faith — even clarifying that sacraments offered by illegitimate bishops are valid. In just one sentence, it formally revoked the special faculties that allowed underground bishops to select new bishops outside Rome's normal command and control structure, thus ending the assessment that the Church in China was uniquely persecuted. Benedict's letter called all Catholics to employ charity, love, and forgiveness to end division. On the diplomatic front, the letter repeated the Holy See's offer to normalize relations through negotiation. It also conceded a role for the official Church, not religious but administrative.

A few months after the letter's release came a sign of goodwill on the regime's side: Beijing Archbishop Fu Tieshan, chairman of the patriotic association since 1998 and vice president of the People's National Assembly, died at an elite party hospital. His powerful status was demonstrated when President Hu Jintao visited the bishop in his final days; Fu received a state burial — attended by few Catholics. But instead of promoting another party stalwart to fill the high-profile post, the patriotic church named a parish priest with prior approval from Rome, Fr. Joseph Li Shan (*AsiaNews* 2007). A Beijing native from a longtime Catholic family, Li had never traveled abroad and was popular among the faithful for challenging the patriotic Church on occasion.

Beijing and Rome quietly engaged in diplomatic talks led by Parolin for the next two years. Operating behind the scenes, the most explicit evidence that things were going well was the arrival in Rome, in May 2008, of the Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra together with the Shanghai Opera House Chorus appearing for the first time at the Vatican. They performed Mozart's Requiem — a bit of cultural diplomacy especially appealing to Pope Benedict, a devoted classical pianist (*Catholic News Agency* 2008).

On his next trip to Beijing, a year later, Archbishop Parolin flew to Beijing with a draft agreement including the names of ten new bishops, endorsed by the Chinese and approved by the Vatican, as well as the outline of a process for their future selection in his briefcase. But the moment for a formal commitment was still not ripe, and neither side signed the proposal

Parolin carried. He wasn't given any more time to negotiate either, because in August 2009 he was sent as apostolic nuncio to Venezuela to cope with socialist ruler Hugo Chávez, who was opposed by most of the nation's bishops. Archbishop Celli and Msgr. Gianfranco Rota Graziosi were also assigned other (unrelated) tasks. These three Vatican diplomats who led the small China and Vietnam team in Rome — Celli, Parolin, and Rota Graziosi — were now gone.

For much of the remainder of Benedict's papacy, a small group of hardline insiders, led by Shanghai-born Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong, worked to undermine negotiations with China. A Wikileaks cable revealed what Zen was telling US diplomats in 2008: He privately criticized the Holy See's policy as bordering "on appeasement, sending the wrong message to the Government of China and undermining the underground church," when he briefed US diplomats in Rome. He mentioned Parolin by name as the driver of China policy, adding that neither Bertone nor Cardinal Ivan Dias, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, had sufficient expertise to manage the relationship (American Embassy Vatican 2008).

Zen helped gain an important appointment at the Vatican for another Hong Konger: Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai, was elevated to the key position of secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in late 2010. Hon became the native Chinese with the highest position in the curia under Benedict — and he fiercely opposed reconciliation with Beijing. Zen, Hon, and Secretary of State Bertone were all members of the Salesians of Don Bosco religious order, founded by a nineteenth-century Italian priest. Thus, under a weak cardinal secretary of state, a coterie of ideologically driven missionaries captured and redirected China policy, undermining diplomatic momentum. The task was left as unfinished business for Pope Francis.

However, Benedict's letter to Chinese Catholics remained an important marker for the overarching goal of unity for all Chinese Catholics, led by bishops selected by the pope in consultation with the government, with an administrative role for state entities such as the patriotic association. And for a quiet diplomat, such a defining document was fitting emblem of his engagement, as it continued to guide Pope Francis's efforts in China.

XI. Conclusion

Popular imagination draws a sharp contrast between Benedict XVI, the shy theologian, and Francis, the bold activist, but that picture fails to reflect the highly effective continuity between the German pope's diplomatic achievements and his Argentinian successor's related breakthroughs, especially in relations with the Russian Orthodox Church, Shia leadership, and the Chinese government. Francis traveled to the Holy Land (2014) and visited a refugee camp in Greece (2016) with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the same year he met Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill in person, a historical first. Francis traveled to Iraq (2021), where he ventured to the modest dwelling of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, one of Shia Islam's most esteemed leaders. And he reconstructed Benedict's China team to achieve a signed provisional agreement with Beijing on the joint selection of bishops (2018), reaffirmed in 2020, 2022, and 2024 for four years. What remains to be seen is whether the American pope, Leo XIV, maintains these diplomatic priorities.

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