

MONIKA JABŁOŃSKA

The Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation
and Institute Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation
ORCID: 0009-0009-8685-1618
monicajablonsk@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION TO THE US-HOLY SEE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS UNDER PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN

And here in Rome, where Empires have been founded, sleep the bones of Martyrs,
and where Christianity hath wept over the slain of her people,
The Holy Father may still sit, telling the nations,
by his precepts, that God must reign everywhere,
as in the humble cottage, so, in the palace of Princes and in the Courts of Kings

Alexander W. Randall

By reputation, the United States is a Protestant country and Catholics were asserted to be unsuited for it. Yet virtually every Catholic writer or thinker who visited America since 1607 has been excited by the country's extraordinary consonance with Catholic faith.

Michael Novak

A b s t r a c t

The author examines the circumstances and events that permitted US President Ronald Reagan to establish full diplomatic relations with the Holy See. This article investigates the 'Holy Alliance' between the American President and the Polish Pope, their experiences, goals, and challenges that help them to establishing collaboration between the US and the Santa Sede. Furthermore, it shows how two compatible political actors and their cooperative attempts to promote peaceful and democratic order to tame the chaos of the world stage, created a stable environment and solid grounds for Reagan's administration to appoint the first full ambassador to the Holy See ever in American history.

K e y w o r d s: diplomatic relations, U.S.-Vatican relations, Ronald Reagan, John Paul II, Holy Alliance, The Divine Plan.

INTRODUCTION

In 1984, the United States of America finally established full diplomatic relations with the Vatican, a feat stemming from the will and resolve of two formidable individuals: US President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II. In particular, the US leader had to fight an uphill battle against the bitter legacy of anti-Catholicism which had long marred North America's history.

The Constitution of the United States, Article II, Section 2, expressly provides that the President 'shall nominate, and by and with the advice and consent of the Senate, shall appoint Ambassadors'.¹ Acting within his power, President nominates an Ambassador to the Vatican. Sending an Ambassador to Rome does not, by any means, violate the so-called principle of separation of Church and State. Appointing an ambassador is also not 'an act of law-making', and it is not 'establishment a religion'. Diplomacy is rather a matter of politics not religion. The purpose of an ambassador is to assert and advance the interests and influence of his or her country.

The United States, with its principles and traditions, demonstrated a very unique approach toward religion in general and the Holy See in particular. According to Samuel Bettwy,

United States-Vatican relations have taken place during those periods of history when secular and religious influences have remained at arm's length and territorial independence has been a fundamental element of international juridical personality. Nonetheless, the United States has shown an interest toward the Vatican that surpasses the technical requirements of statehood.²

Given America's troubled history with Catholicism, it is unsurprising that this nation took a long time to establish full-fledged diplomatic relations with the Holy See, ending long periods of diplomatic ambiguity.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Holy See in 1984 is of serious significance not only because Reagan was a Protestant but also because he was the first President of the United States of America who actually accomplished

¹ *The Constitution of the United States of America*, Article II, Section 2 (Carlisle: Applewood Books, 1995), p. 12.

² Samuel W. Bettwy, 'United States-Vatican Recognition: Background and Issues', *Journal of Church and State* 29: 3, 1984, p. 240; Loretta Clare Feiertag, *American Public Opinion on the Diplomatic Relations between the United States and the Papal States, 1847–1867* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America, 1933).

the task of normalizing the relationship with Rome. He succeeded triumphantly, where others failed.

Anti-Communism and Western Christian unity were some of the strongest selling points to establish diplomatic relations with Rome. It was a matter of prestige for America to join the ranks of other Western, civilized nations recognized by the Holy See, unlike the totalitarian Soviet Union, its allies, and satellites. Therefore, the mutual diplomatic relations were seen as a triumph of relationship of two leaders—the head of the Catholic Church and the chief of the Free World—and a relationship of two countries enduringly vital to the hopes for a peaceful world where men, regardless of their religion, would someday accept each other and live accordingly.

On 10 January 1984, the United States became the 107th nation and the first superpower to enjoy reciprocal diplomatic relations with the Holy See.³ More specifically, it was the Reagan administration that announced establishing full diplomatic relation⁴ with the Holy See.⁵ Technically, the treaty was a restoration of mutual links after a hiatus of 117 years.

To restore was the operative verb, since the relations had existed for quite a while since the early 19th century and had never been formally broken. They were simply allowed to lapse after Congress voted to stop funding the American mission in Rome in 1867. Over

³ Diplomatic Relations were established with the Holy See, not with the Pope or with the Roman Catholic Church. The Holy See has wide influence and unique access in areas of great interest to the United States: Eastern Europe, Central America, Africa, etc. They are not simply observers or moral guides, but take an active role in international political issues. See, 'John Hughes Statement', 10 January 1984, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum, Ronald Reagan Archives, Simi Valley, CA, Reagan administration, copy of in my collection; 'U.S. and Vatican Restore Full Ties After 117 Years', *New York Times*, 11 January 1984, p. 4, col. 3.

⁴ The United States of America and the Holy See, in the desire to further promote the existing mutual friendly relations, have decided by common agreement to establish diplomatic relations between them at the level of Embassy on the part of the United States of America, and nunciature on the part of the Holy See, as of today, January 10, 1984', See U.S. Department of State website and U.S. Embassy to the Holy See; See the letter of John Paul II to Ambassador William Wilson on April 9, 1984; See also 20 WEEKLY COMP. PRES. Doc. 22 (10 Jan. 1984) (President Reagan announced the nomination of William Wilson to be the first full rank ambassador to the Holy See). The Senate confirmed Wilson's nomination by a vote of 81 to 13. 130 CONG. REC.S2390 (7 March 1984). In November, 1983, The House and Senate repealed an 1867 law which prohibited the funding of an embassy in Rome. See 129 CONG. REC.S16,367, H 10,429 (18 Nov. 1988).

⁵ The term 'Holy See' and 'Vatican' are often used interchangeably. Technically, they are distinct: the Vatican is the Vatican Palace, where the pope and the staff of the Secretariat of State work. 'Vatican' can also refer to the state of Vatican City, a territorial entity in which the pope is sovereign. The Holy See is the ministry of the pope as the supreme pastor of the Roman Catholic Church.

a hundred years later, the Reagan Administration successfully convinced the Congress to retract that decision. Among other things, the White House argued that the defunding was not tantamount to a total termination of diplomatic relations, which boosted the other arguments about anti-Communism and Western unity, to sway the Congressmen to embrace the President's endeavor.

'We respect the great moral and political influence which he and the Vatican exercise throughout the world', said the President's spokesman of Pope John Paul II, announcing the reestablishment of the diplomatic relations with the United States. And he further stressed: 'We admire the courageous stand he takes in defense of Western values'. At the same time when the President Reagan nominated William A. Wilson as the first full U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, Cardinal Pio Langhi, who had been serving as the papal envoy to the United States, was elevated to the status of nuncio in Washington DC.

On 7 March 1984, two hundred and five years after American's second President John Adams, falsely predicted the United States would never have diplomatic relations with the Holy See—

Congress will probably never send a Minister to His Holiness who can do them no service, upon condition of receiving a Catholic legate or nuncio; or, in other words, an ecclesiastical tyrant which, it is to be hoped, the United States will be too wise ever to admit into their territories⁶

—something providential and remarkable occurred nevertheless: the United States announced its full diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

John Paul II welcomed Ambassador Wilson as follows:

On the part of the Holy See this collaboration means striving earnestly to be of service. It means entering an extended dialogue on the important issues which are at the basis of civilization itself. It means exerting common efforts to defend human dignity and the rights of the human person—every human person, every man, woman and child on this earth. In this collaboration, the Holy See envisions a useful and respectful exchange of ideas on world peace and development, and on the conditions essential to their attainment, beginning with the need to protect freedom, promote justice, and vindicate

⁶ Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams: Letters and State Papers 1777–1782*, vol. 7 (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1856), pp. 109–10, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/adams-the-works-of-john-adams-vol-7-letters-and-state-papers-1777-1782>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 15 March 2024.)

truth against every attempted manipulation. And since freedom, justice, and truth are related to concrete situation in life, our common concern must necessarily embrace the global problems of world hunger, the arms race, human misery, the oppression of the weak, the plight of the poor, the condition of refugees, the violation of conscience and the integral development of individuals communities and nations. All of these points have vital interest for the Government of the United States, as well as for the Catholics of the United States and of the world, because they deeply affect the lives of people—the American people and all the other peoples of the world—and because of the very special position of the United States on the international scene.⁷

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is dearth of information about Catholics of early north America. The Pilgrims and the Puritans dominate the picture. Today's histories include a wider variety of people—Native Americans, African Americans, Dutch, Jews—but still not much about Catholics and even less about the prominent Maryland family of the Carrolls.⁸ The Carrolls were not only important founding fathers of the United States; they were also—and this applies to John Carroll especially—critical early links between the new nation and the Catholic Church in Rome'.⁹

A diplomatic history of the United States officially began on 4 July 1776, when the Continental Congress declared the thirteen colonies an independent nation. The colonies were populated almost exclusively by Protestants.

In general, settled by English colonists and others like them, America was inhospitable to Roman Catholics during the formative years. The Massachusetts Bay Colony banished, under the threat of death, any 'Jesuits or ecclesiastical person ordained by the authority of the pope'. Virginia had a law excluding 'popish recusants' (Catholics who persisted in practicing their faith) from a host of occupations and rights. Until the Revolution, no colony, except for Pennsylvania, had openly allowed Catholics to celebrate mass.

However, there were exceptions. Most notably, Maryland was initially intended to be a home for Catholics. The colony was founded

⁷ See, letter by John Paul II to Ambassador William Wilson, Vatican, 9 April 1984.

⁸ John Carroll was the first Catholic bishop in the United States and Georgetown University's founder. His brother, Daniel, was a framer of Independence. Charles Carroll was a signer of the Declaration of Independence.

⁹ Francis Rooney, *The Global Vatican* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), p. 4; Robert Graham, *Vatican Diplomacy. A Study of Church and State on the International Plane* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959); Thomas Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969).

by Cecil Calvert, better known as the second Lord Baltimore. According to Ambassador Francis Rooney,

In 1649, the Maryland assembly took a historic step, ensuring the right of Catholics and Protestants to practice their respective religions. Maryland's 'Toleration Act', limited as it was—no allowance was made for Jews or other non-Christian faiths—is widely considered a template for the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment that would be adopted by the United States 140 years later.¹⁰

But, ultimately, Maryland did not turn out to be a happy place for Catholics. Even there, Protestant orthodoxy became the law of the land. Having been tempered by years of persecution, Maryland Catholics learned to accommodate their faith to reality. Most of priests, during that period of time, were itinerant missionaries who traveled through the countryside to perform baptisms, weddings, burials, and other rituals.

Only Rhode Island came even close to protecting anything other than Protestantism. The Rhode Island Royal Charter exception obtained in 1663 by Roger Williams and John Clarke contains unique provisions which make it different from the charters granted to the other colonies. Among various liberties, it gave the Rhode Islanders their freedom of religion. Yet, Catholicism failed to thrive in Rhode Island. That was also the case practically elsewhere in the newly independent nation.

Little wonder then that the question of diplomatic relations with Rome was neither a priority nor a popular one. Thus, both elite and popular opinion tended to oppose diplomatic relations with the Holy See. In addition to prevalent anti-Catholicism, the opposition stems from complex considerations, mostly relating to the US Constitution, and more specifically its First Amendment. In particular, this pertains to a clause that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. The separation of church and state has been an issue of religious freedom in America which calls for equal treatment of all religious bodies by the national government.

The writings of Roger Williams¹¹ and John Locke¹² influenced America's Founding Fathers on the separation of church and state

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

¹¹ Roger Williams was a Baptist theologian and the founder of the colony Rhode Island.

¹² John Locke, the English philosopher who despised Catholicism so intensely that he neglected to include it as a religion deserving a toleration.

in several different ways: first, the relationship between the sacred and profane spheres; second, religious tolerance; and, third, liberty of conscience. Locke argued that the church and state should be separate and distinct, and that the church's authority could not extend to the matters of state.

At the same time, Williams referred to 'a high wall between church and state to keep the wilderness of government out of the affairs of religion'. Essentially, he wanted to stop the chaos and immorality of government from invading the purity of a person's conscience and his freedom to find their own truth or salvation.

Locke defended religious toleration among different Christians sects. Williams' Providence was the first political entity to maintain the separation of church and state based on religious freedom. Finally, Locke's social contract theory argued that the government had no authority over individual conscience, which he believed regulated by natural law. From Williams's evangelical perspective, the religious aspect of conscience was foremost. He explained that the core of religious freedom is the inviolability of conscience because conscience is the medium by which a person communicates with God. No person or authority is justified in intruding into this sacred realm.

Locke was the foremost influence on leading US Founding Father Thomas Jefferson's religious thinking. Jefferson credited Locke for helping him frame the Declaration of Independence. Finally, Jefferson joined James Madison and other Founding Fathers in composing a constitution that extended freedom of worship to all religions, including Catholicism. However, the Founders recognized, as Locke never had, that the logic of human rights demanded the acceptance of full religious freedom.

Today, the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States does not prohibit the recognition of the Holy See or any other religions state on the ground of separation of church and state. It simply states that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof [...]'.¹³ Put differently, the writers of the amendment wished to preclude the establishment of a state religion. Most of them adhered to various Protestant creeds, and usually found Catholicism inimical to their belief systems.

¹³ *The Constitution of the United States of America*, Amendment I to the U.S. Constitution (Carlisle: Applewood Books, 1995), p. 18.

A SYNOPSIS OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH THE VATICAN

There have been different phases in the relationship between the USA and the Vatican.

They oscillated between conditional engagement, diplomatic neglect, and full-fledged relations. A brief description follows.

United States-Vatican Diplomatic Relations: 1776–1867

During the years 1776–1867, the United States maintained reciprocal consular relations with the Papal States. But consular relationship between two countries was a very different matter from regular diplomatic contacts. The main occupation of the consuls was to look after the commercial interests of their countries and to care for the occasional interests of citizens of their respective governments. International Law does not recognize them as forming a class of diplomatic agents.

Back in 1779, President John Adams had announced that Congress would probably never send a minister to His Holiness for he could do the United States no service, nor would the United States ever admit a Catholic legate or ecclesiastical tyrant into its territories.¹⁴

During the period of consular relations, the Holy See accredited six consuls general to the United States.

The election of Pius IX as a head of the Catholic Church in 1846, encouraged President James Polk to establish formal diplomatic relations with the Papal States, elevating the rank of its leading diplomat from consul to *charge d'affaires*. Mr. Martin, as *Charge d’Affaires*, was instructed to deal with the Holy Father as a lay ruler and not as head of the Catholic Church. He was advised to promote political good will and to gather and report to the State Department information about commercial relations between the United States and the Papal States. Twenty days after presenting his credentials to the Papal Secretary of State, Mr. Martin died. Next, Lewis Cass Jr., became a new American Minister Resident to the Papal State. Ten years later, President Buchanan appointed John Stockton to succeed Mr. Cass.

¹⁴ Daniel George Babis and Anthony Maceli, *A United States Ambassador to the Vatican* (New York: Pageant Press, 1952), p. 6.

Abraham Lincoln appointed Alexander Randall to the office in 1861, Richard Blatchford in 1862, and Rufus King in 1863. The last named served until the Congress declined to appropriate funds for the post in 1867.

In that year, the American mission to Rome came to an end. The suspension of diplomatic relation resulted in a virtual cessation of major transactions between the US and the Vatican for over fifty years. During the time of neglected relations, the incompatibility of values between the US and the Vatican reasserted itself. The United States was the beacon of liberty with a constitutional government, checks and balances, the separations of powers, the separation of church and state, and the progressive liberties of conscience, speech, press, and so on. The Vatican, until rather recently (Vatican II), remained the fortress of tradition and monarchy. As recently as 1895, a pope declared that the American principle of the separation of church and state was not an acceptable model for Catholics.

A New Era of Relations between the US and Papal State: 1929–1952

During the Pontificate of Pius XI, on 11 February 1929, the Treaty of Lateran was signed. The treaty included two things: the settling of the Roman Question, and the Concordat governing the relations between the Holy See and Italy. According to the treaty, the Italian Government recognized the absolute sovereignty of the Papal Government over the Vatican City and independence of the Holy See in international matters.

In 1939, Pius XII ascended the Papal throne. On 23 December of that year, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) announced that he was sending a special envoy to the Vatican. He appointed Myron Charles Taylor to be his personal representative to Pope Pius XII.¹⁵ President Roosevelt charged his representative with a number of duties. The first objective for Taylor was secure Italy's neutrality to prevent the spread of war. But in a less than a year after taking office, Taylor's health deteriorated, and he was compelled to return home. To preserve regular diplomatic contact with the Holy See during Taylor's absence, the Senate Department dispatched Harold Tittmann, a counselor at the US Embassy in Rome, to act as Assistant

¹⁵ DEPT ST. BULL. 711–12 (1939). President Truman later reappointed Taylor to the same position. 14 DEPT ST. BULL. 818 (1946).

to the Personal Representative of the President of the United States to His Holiness the Pope, Pius XII. *De facto*, Tittmann had acted as an assistant to Taylor.

On 11 December 1941, Italy and Germany declared war on the United States. It was nearly impossible to get Taylor back to Italy until September 1942. Following President Roosevelt death, Taylor continued in his mission, making occasional trips to the Holy See to discuss matters of political and humanitarian significance with Pope Pius XII. In the Spring of 1946, Taylor described the relation between the Pope and the President of the United States as follows:

The co-work between him and Pope Pius XII and others in the spiritual and humanitarian spheres of life devoted to this cause at home and abroad, was a manifestation of their inspired efforts to give to the world's moral forces, during these years of fateful crisis, unity of goal and plan, leadership in concerting their influence, encouragement for their humanitarian services to alleviate suffering, and common expression of their hopes and purposes in the future decisions as to the peace and welfare of mankind. While their leadership was from a national position on one hand and a religious position on the other, the challenge they confronted was a moral one, and their respective efforts were for moral objectives.¹⁶

President Harry Truman wished to continue friendly relations with the Pope, and, therefore, in October 1951, he appointed General Mark Clark as his ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary to the Holy See. But anti-Catholic prejudice bubbled up to the surface once again in the US. Later angry letters and telegrams from Protestant lobbying groups to the White House described the appointment as a 'threat to our freedom' and 'disruptive to our nation life' as well as 'a possible split of the country'. Under the pressure from the outside, Truman withdrew Clark's nomination and chose not to attempt another appointment. Finally, as Will Inboden notes, 'Truman's bid in 1951 to upgrade the relationship to ambassadorial level had ignited outrage among American Protestants and been rejected by Congress'.¹⁷

Era of Diplomatic Neglect: 1950–1981

In 1950, the United States entered a second era of diplomatic neglect towards the Vatican. The US did not maintain formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See during that time.

¹⁶ Babis and Maceli, *A United States Ambassador to the Vatican*, p. 31.

¹⁷ William Charles Inboden, *The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink* (Dutton, MT: Penguin, 2022), p. 265.

Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower did not appoint a personal envoy to the Vatican. Paradoxically, things failed to improve when John F. Kennedy was elected US President, America's first Catholic in the Oval Office. President Kennedy came from a prominent Catholic family and his father, Joseph Kennedy, was a friend of Cardinal Spellman, and of Myron Taylor, President Roosevelt's first diplomatic agent to the Holy See. Both Joseph Kennedy and Spellman were two prominent men who vigorously pushed to establish stronger relations with the Holy See. For political reasons, however, John F. Kennedy opposed US recognition of the Roman Curia. President Kennedy clearly 'declared [that he] stands against an Ambassador to the Vatican'.¹⁸

President Johnson continued Kennedy's policy of avoiding diplomatic ties to the Holy See.

However, in 1970, at the peak of the Vietnam conflict, President Richard M. Nixon reestablished direct contacts with the Vatican. He named Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge as his special envoy to the Pope. Lodge was to visit the Vatican 'from time to time' to exchange views on international issues of common concern to United States and the Pope and the Vatican. He was authorized to maintain a permanent office in Rome. The mission was highly valued by the Vatican. Lodge served Richard Nixon and his successor Gerald Ford. In October 1977, he was succeeded by President's Carter's appointee, David M. Walters who was named personal representative of the president and entrusted visiting the Vatican from 'time to time'.

The year 1978 was historic for the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Paul VI died. Before President Carter had time to appoint a new representative, John Paul I was elected Pope but passed away unexpectedly within a month. In October 1978 Karol Wojtyła was elected, as John Paul II, to the Throne of Saint Peter. President Carter was one of the first world leaders to congratulate him on his election and sent the U.S. delegation to his October 22–23 inauguration. The delegation included Zbigniew Brzezinski, a Polish-American Catholic and anticommunist, who served as the national security advisor to the Carter administration. Brzezinski suggested Carter to continue a close relationship with the Pope and welcome any views John Paul II may wish to send through the Papal representation in the US. To

¹⁸ John Fitzgerald Kennedy, *Address of Senator John F. Kennedy to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association*, 12 September 1960, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, a copy in my collection.

this end, the American President appointed Robert Wagner, former mayor of New York City, to be his unofficial representative to the new pope. Wagner played an important role of strengthening U.S.-Vatican diplomatic relations.

U.S. Full Diplomatic Relations with the Vatican in 1984

The whole scenario changed when President Ronald Reagan took office in 1980.¹⁹ As William Inboden remarks:

Over the past two years, Reagan had worked with eager members of Congress to restore funding for a diplomatic mission to the Vatican. The President used his personal credibility with evangelical Protestants, including quiet help from Billy Graham to gauge and in some cases alleviate opposition.²⁰

And further:

Not all agreed [...] His willingness to incur their disfavor ten months before the election shows the priority that he [Reagan] put on Vatican relations. It did not hurt that American Catholics, also an important voting bloc, overwhelmingly supported the move.²¹

The White House proceeded apace in its mission to normalize the relationship with the Vatican. The appointment process consisted of two parts. 'It first involved repealing the 1967 ban of funding for U.S. mission to the Holy See without which, some argued, an ambassador could not be named'.²² Reagan's two congressional staunch supporters at this stage were Clement Zablocki, a Democratic Congressman from Wisconsin, and Richard Lugar, a Republican Senator from Indiana. On 30 June 1983, the Catholic Clement Zablocki, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, introduced a resolution in the House of Representatives calling for 'the establishment of United States diplomatic relations with the Vatican'. The Democrat appreciated the value of such a political move. 'He, too, recognized

¹⁹ See, 'Memorandum for Mr. Robert C. McFarlane Regarding Scenario for Establishing U.S.-Vatican Diplomatic Relations', 9 Nov. 1983, US Dept of State S/S #8334550, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA, Archives, copy in my collection.

²⁰ See, letter from Billy Graham to Bill Clark, 25 April 1983, folder '8391492', box 4; memo from Clark to Dennis Blaire 'Establishing Formal Diplomatic Relations with the Holy See', 22 February 1983, folder: Vatican 1983-1984 (of 13) RAC Box 7.

²¹ Inboden, *The Peacemaker*, p. 265.

²² Letter, Robert McConnel to David Stockman, 31 August 1983, ID#179568, Whorm: Subject Files, Ronald Reagan Library (hereafter PRL).

the importance of the Holy See as a valuable source of information'.²³ In July 1983, Senator Lugar, a Methodist, introduced in the Senate a bill identical to Zablocki's. Lugar said: 'The Vatican is a sensitive focus on international relations. It is also a sovereign state, and with John Paul's courage and character, a powerful force for decency in the world'.²⁴ Next, despite some criticism, on 22 September 1983, the Lugar Bill passed the Senate by a unanimous vote. Senator Lugar addressed the critics as follows: 'In many ways, the Vatican is far more significant and wide-ranging actor that many of other Governments with which we maintain formal relations'.²⁵

With some external help, Ronald Reagan became the first President of the United States of America ever who established full, formal diplomatic ties with the Holy See in 1984.²⁶ He announced the nomination of William Wilson as the first Ambassador to the Holy See on 10 January 1984. Wilson's personal character and professional qualifications were never brought into question. He was confirmed in the Senate by a vote of 81–13. Wilson was well received at the Vatican, where upon accepting his credentials John Paul II rejoiced: 'On this occasion I cannot fail to express my conviction that the condition of today's world depends in great measure on the way the United States exercises her global mission of service to humanity'.²⁷ Simultaneously, Archbishop Pio Laghi was promoted from the apostolic delegate to pro-nuncio, the first papal diplomat fully accredited to the United States.

Shortly after the Senate confirmation, several federal lawsuits were filed by various American opposition groups in federal court challenging the constitutionality of Reagan's actions. They mainly argued that the President's moves amounted to the establishment of religion in violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause. In addition, plaintiffs further alleged that Reagan exceeded his

²³ Ch. O'Neill, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965* by Gerald P. Fogarty, *Archivum Historiae Pontificae* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers, 1983), vol. 21, p. 238.

²⁴ 'Lugar Calls for Full Diplomatic Relations With Vatican', Press Release, Office of Senators R. Lugar, 21 July 1983.

²⁵ 'Report of Audience Confirming William A. Wilson', EUR-407, Advantage of US-Holy See ties cited, Rome, Embassy Vatican files.

²⁶ See, Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965* (Stuttgart: Michael Glazier Books, 1982), p. 400; Andrew Essig and Jennifer Moore, 'U.S.-Holy See Diplomacy: The Establishment of Formal Relations, 1984', *The Catholic Historical Review* 95: 4, 2009, pp. 741–64.

²⁷ Statement by Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the presentation on the credentials of Ambassador William A. Wilson, 9 April 1984, Rome, Vatican files.

executive powers granted in Article II of the U.S. Constitution since the Vatican was not a state eligible to receive diplomatic recognition. The plaintiffs also claimed the Fifth Amendment's equal protection clause was violated by the government giving special treatment to the Catholic Church over other religious groups. The district court agreed with the defendants and dismissed the plaintiffs' complaint on two grounds, and the case never reached a trial on the merits of the constitutional challenges. The court first ruled that the plaintiffs lacked standing to bring the case because they did not suffer a specific injury as a result of the government's actions. The court ultimately ruled that 'a citizen does not have standing to litigate alleged violations of the Establishment Clause merely because of an interest in achieving a just society in which church-state separationist values are preserved'.²⁸ The district court also ruled that 'the subject matter of the case was nonjusticiable'.²⁹ Due to procedural problems, the various courts who examined Reagan's decision never specifically ruled on the constitutionality of his actions. The judicial opinions, however, 'seemed to emphasize that the Vatican's unique status as both a sovereign territory and the center of the Roman Catholic Church protects its diplomatic status from constitutional attack'.³⁰ In addition, the courts continually stated that 'the granting of diplomatic relations is a power specifically reserved for the executive branch by the Constitution'.³¹

The Future of US-Vatican Relations

The Cold War presented the United States with new opportunities in conjunction with maintaining their diplomatic relations with the Holy See. President Reagan and Pope John Paul II took their cooperation to a new level. Since then, the United States continues—while being aware of both the international stature and the global reach of the

²⁸ *Americans United for Separation of Church and State v. Ronald W. Reagan*, 607' F. Supp. 747 (E.D. Pa. 1985), p. 750

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.751–52

³⁰ *Americans United for Separation of Church and State v. Ronald W Reagan*, 786 F.2d 194, 198 (3rd Circuit 1986). Throughout the opinion, the Third Circuit Court of Appeals exclusively used the term Vatican instead of Holy See while referring to the establishment of diplomatic relations. The court does not explain its choice of terminology, which could potentially be due to a misunderstanding of the distinction between the Vatican and Holy See.

³¹ See 'Americans United for Separation of Church and State', 786 F.2d at 201-02.

Holy See as well as its moral influence and authority to promote religious freedom, human liberties, and related values—to maintain diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

The United States and the Holy See enjoy a positive relationship that serves to amplify a global message of peace, freedom, and justice. The United States and the Holy See work together on shared priorities, such as promoting religious freedom and combating human trafficking.³²

With the administration of President George H.W. Bush came a new Ambassador to the Holy See, Thomas Melady. He started his diplomatic mission at the time when the evolving relationship between the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and John Paul II was of keen interest to the United States. The Pope told Melady that Gorbachev's liberal sentiments were sincere. Later, Ambassador Melady wrote that this information formed a foundation for President Bush's policy towards the Soviet leader. Melady was also faced with a diplomatic crisis when the Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega sought to avoid arrest by the US and his countrymen by seeking asylum in the Panama City nunciature of the Holy See. Finally, Melady and other US officials working with the Vatican were able to negotiate Noriega's voluntary surrender to the US authorities. However, the conflict in Panama was soon overshadowed by the 1990 Gulf War in Iraq. 'Melady was in the difficult position of justifying the war against Iraq to a pope who believed that Kuwait should be liberated through diplomatic dialogue and not through the use of force'.³³

Bush's successor, President Bill Clinton, appointed mayor of Boston Raymond Flynn to be the fifth Ambassador to the Holy See. Ambassador Flynn worked to build stronger ties between the government and the private sector with the Vatican's involvement. Despite Flynn's best efforts, the Clinton Administration's relations with the Holy See were often fraught with tension. In 1997 Clinton, after Flynn's resignation, nominated Corinne 'Lindy' Boggs of Louisiana to be the fifth US Ambassador to the Holy See. Boggs worked to promote worldwide religious freedom and religious tolerance on behalf of the Clinton Administration. She raised awareness at the White House of the Holy See's continued hopes for nuclear disarmament and third-

³² 'U.S. Relations with the Holy See', 27 August 2020, U.S. Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-the-holy-see/>.

³³ Ray Flynn, *John Paul II: A Personal Portrait of the Pope and the Man* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001), pp. 101–07.

-world debt relief. Boggs also became an outspoken leader in the worldwide fight against trafficking in human beings.

The newly elected George W. Bush appointed Jim Nicholson to be an Ambassador to the Holy See on 10 August 2001. That year, suddenly, the United States and the world were plunged into the shock of the terrorist attack on America on 11 September 2001. During the meeting between Ambassador Nicholson and John Paul II, the stage was set for the Holy See's support of the US counter-terror campaign. Enjoying the backing of the Holy See in a combat context was important for President Bush as he led a coalition of nations united in this 'war on terrorism'. The U.S. Embassy to the Holy See in Rome, during George W. Bush presidency, has continued working with the Holy See on issues on terrorism, Middle East peace, religious freedom, human rights, hunger, or human trafficking. This diplomatic relation has proven itself crucial to the US in his efforts to make the people of the world safe, fed, and hopeful.

The U.S.-Vatican diplomatic relation remains tense following Joseph Ratzinger's accession as Pope Benedict XVI, particularly as the Obama administration pursues a more liberal agenda. Since President Obama took office, he has visited the Vatican once, and his administration has demonstrated little enthusiasm in the Holy See's diplomatic role in the world. According to scholars and some former U.S. Ambassadors to the Holy See, this is lost opportunity at a critical time for America. Despite some moral issues, President Obama and his administration are in disagreement with the teaching of the Catholic Church, the initial contacts between President Obama and the Holy See have been friendly and directed to an atmosphere of positive engagement.

The bilateral relationship between the Holy See and the United States, during Trump administration, was rather strained.

Even if Pope Francis and U.S. President Donald Trump have strong differences on the issue of migration, there are many other areas of common agreement where their joint efforts promote peace and human dignity [...] Defending religious freedom, fighting human trafficking and responding to natural and human-made disasters are some of the areas where the partnership benefits humanity,³⁴ —said Callista Gingrich, the U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican.

³⁴ U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, Vatican-U.S. Ties Benefit Humanity, U.S. Department of State, 3 October 2019, <https://va.usembassy.gov/vatican-u-s-ties-benefit-humanity-ambassador-says/>.

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN AND JOHN PAUL II: PARALLEL INTERESTS

In the designs of Providence, there are no mere coincidences.

John Paul II

A concurrence of events and personalities translated into establishing of formal diplomatic relations between the USA and the Holy See. Reagan viewed the Holy See as a powerful spiritual force against evil in the world. And the pope recognized that the United States had a special responsibility 'to fulfill its mission in the service of world peace'.³⁵ There was a definite mutual convergence of values and interests.

'We respect the great moral and political influence which he and the Vatican exercise throughout the world'—said the president's spokesman of Pope John Paul II, announcing the launching of full diplomatic relations on 10 January 1984. 'We admire the courageous stand he takes in defense of Western values', the spokesman continued.

President Ronald Reagan established full diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1984 because, among other reasons, he realized that he could have no better partner—experienced and knowledgeable about Communism—than Pope John Paul II in the fight against the Soviet Empire and the Communist system.

Karol Wojtyła was a Polish priest from behind the Iron Curtain. Ronald Reagan was a movie star from Hollywood. John Paul II became one of the most significant world leaders in the twentieth century. He was the first non-Italian pope in half a millennium and the first Polish pope. Ronald Reagan became, as Solidarity was taking roots in Poland, the political leader of the free world. 'Many people contributed to the collapse of Soviet empire, but no two were as indispensable as the president and the pope'.³⁶

According to Dr. Paul Kengor,

Reagan and John Paul II were in many ways a perfect match [...] The Pope himself had suffered an assassination attempt in 1981, only six weeks after Reagan's, and each man was able to rise above his personal suffering when

³⁵ 'Ronald Reagan: Remarks Following a Meeting with Pope John Paul II in Vatican City', The American Presidency Project, 30 January 2007, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=42610&st=Pope+John+Paul+II&stl=>; see, 'Memorandum for the Honorable George P. Schultz, The Secretary of State Regarding the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations with the Vatican', 16 December 1983, NLS F9705814 *230, 8/13/2007.

³⁶ Rooney, *The Global Vatican*, p. 42.

it came to his assassin: just as John Paul II forgave his would-be assassin, even visiting him in prison, Reagan prayed for forgiveness for Hinckley. John Paul's passionate association with his Poland homeland, moreover, rendered him a fierce and faithfully ally to Reagan in their shared anticommunism. The two appeared to believe equally in God's will, and shared a faith-based optimism that made them hopeful about the future.³⁷

John Paul II and Ronald Reagan were both charismatic, active, and optimistic men with a great sense of humor. They were both actors. They both believed in the power of the spoken word: the word that could shape people's lives and destinies and change their minds and hearts.

The fact that they were both actors made a great difference—not only in terms of communication skills, but even more importantly in shaping how both men looked at the human condition and its possibilities. The president and the Pope never discussed their respective theatrical careers in any depth. They didn't have to. Each recognized in the other a shared sense of the drama of late 20th-century life and of Communism's role in that drama.³⁸

Both Reagan and Wojtyła used the power of the spoken word to confront evil. It took moral courage to do so, but the evil confronting them was easy to identify; it had a face and a name. It was a totalitarian Communist system which denied the existence of God and thrived only when human dignity was violated. John Paul II and President Reagan fought that evil by refusing to compromise with it, and by speaking simply and clearly about what they stood for: 'let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil'.³⁹

In the spring 1981, the president and the pope shared something else in common: an assassination attempt. Unlike the attempt on Reagan's life, which was a work of a disturbed individual, the assassination attempt on John Paul II gave indication of conspiracy where the Soviet Union was involved, either directly or indirectly.

They believed in God and a merciful Providence. 'Their respective religious faiths giving them an extraordinary amount of common ground'.⁴⁰

³⁷ Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), pp. 209–10; idem, *The Divine Plan* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2019).

³⁸ George Weigel, 'The President and the Pope', *National Review*, 2 April 2005, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/214067/president-and-pope-george-weigel>.

³⁹ Matthew: 5:37.

⁴⁰ Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan*, p. 209.

Reagan's

[b]elief in God was a key source of his optimism and boldness, his daring and self-security, and his confidence; these essential intangibles carried him throughout his presidency—and career as a whole—and enabled him to achieve what he did.⁴¹

To Reagan, John Paul II represented the best of both worlds, faith in God and hardcore anti-Communism.

Reagan himself had been raised Protestant. But he was also culturally a Catholic on the account of his Irish Catholic father. He also surrounded himself with a number of Catholics in his administration such as William Casey at CIA or Richard Allen as national security advisor. His spirituality, belief in the power of prayer, and trust in the application of religious principles to policy all shaped his presidency and initiated reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Once he remarked: 'Our National Motto: "In God We Trust"—was not chosen lightly. It reflects a basic recognition that there is a divine authority in the universe to which this nation owes homage'.⁴² And then, in 1984, he added 'Without God, there is no virtue because there is no prompting of the conscience [...] without God, there is a coarsening of the society; without God, democracy will not and cannot long endure'.⁴³

Did Reagan ponder whether being shot was part of God's plan for him? He unsurprisingly did not share whatever private thoughts he may have had, but on Good Friday, less than three weeks after the shooting, out of the blue Reagan told Mike Deaver that he wanted to talk to a clergyman. Deaver, an ex-seminarian, arranged for Terence Cardinal Cooke to come down from New York on short notice to visit with Reagan in the family residence at the White House. Reagan told the cardinal:

I have decided that whatever time I have left is for Him. Separately Mother Teresa told Reagan that God had spared him for a purpose. The providential character of Reagan's survival was perhaps confirmed two months later when, in a coincidence that seems hard to dismiss out of hand, Pope John Paul II survived an assassin's bullet in Vatican Square. Providence or not, the Pope's shooting was a sign that the Cold War had entered a dangerous new

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 175.

⁴² Ronald Reagan, *Proclamation 4826: National Day of Prayer 1981*, 19 May 1981, National Archives of Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum in Simi Valley.

⁴³ Ronald Reagan, *Remarks at an Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast in Dallas, Texas 1984*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, <https://www.reaganfoundation.org/ronald-reagan/reagan-quotes-speeches/remarks-at-an-ecumenical-prayer-breakfast-in-dallas-texas/>.

phase, as many western intelligence analysts believed the Pope's shooting was a conspiracy involving Soviet bloc intelligence agencies [...].⁴⁴

Both men—John Paul II and Ronald Reagan—saw Communism as a threat to freedom, peace and opportunity worldwide. Wojtyła survived the Nazi occupation of Poland during World War II.

He knew first-hand the suffering, challenges, and harassment posed by Communist oppression in his native land. Reagan was a staunch anti-Communist. He 'believed that those communist regimes were not "just another form of government [...]" but a monstrous aberration".⁴⁵ But he believed that the United States could win the Cold War.⁴⁶ 'We win, they lose'—Reagan says.

As theologian George Weigel has pointed out:

[t]hey both believed that Communism was moral evil, not simply wrong-headed economics. They were both confident that of the capacity of free people to meet the Communist challenge. Both were convinced that in the contest with Communism, victory, not mere accommodation, was possible. Both had a sense of the drama of late twentieth-century history, and both were confident that the spoken word of truth could cut through the static of Communism's lies and rouse people from their acquiescence to servitude.⁴⁷

While the Cold War had hung over the world since 1945, Central and Eastern Europe was firmly under the control of an atheistic and inhuman Communist regime. Poland remained under the yoke of the Soviet empire. Within his first year as pope, John Paul II personally threw open the doors to Christ in his native land. 'Be not afraid!'—he said—'Christ knows "what is in man". He alone knows it'. In his homily in Warsaw for the Pentecost Eve in 1979 he prayed: 'Let your Spirit descend and renew the face of the land. *This* land'. He reminded his Polish fellows that 'the exclusion of Christ from the history of man is an act against man'. And Polish people positively responded in solidarity to reestablish Polish national life on its Christian spiritual and moral bases.

⁴⁴ Steven Hayward, *The Age of Reagan. The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980–1989* (New York: Forum Books, 2009), p. 142.

⁴⁵ Peter Schweizer, *Victory: The Reagan Administration's Secret Strategy that Hastened the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), p. 13.

⁴⁶ Richard Allen, future national security adviser, recalled a meeting with Reagan in 1977 where Reagan asked Allen if he would like to hear his theory of the Cold War: My theory of the cold War is that we win and they lose. See, Allen, *Pope John Paul II, Ronald Reagan, and the Collapse of Communism: A Historic Confluence*, speech at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center, Washington DC 14, 2004.

⁴⁷ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 441.

Reagan was under great impression of the pope's first trip to Poland. He admired John Paul II. Once, Reagan said: 'It has been a long time since we've seen a leader of such courage and such uncompromising dedication to simple morality—to the belief that right does make might'.⁴⁸

Reagan saw Poland as a soft spot behind the Iron Curtain, 'a state whose fall could knock down the Soviet dominoes in Eastern Europe'.⁴⁹ According to Peter Schweizer, 'Reagan was certainly mindful of the role the Church could play in bringing freedom to Poland'.⁵⁰ He trusted that Poland, with its strong Church and unique commitment to God, would defeat the Communist regime. Once Reagan wrote to a friend, 'I have had a feeling particularly in the pope's visit to Poland, that religion may turn out to be the Soviets' Achilles' heel'.⁵¹ He also saw John Paul II as an ally and catalyst who could help to undermine the Communist domination. Indeed, he could not have a better partner to fight against communism than the Polish Pope.

Their relationship went far beyond the usual ceremonial events between a president and a pope. As they came to know each other better, they found they had similar views about Communism domination of Eastern Europe, and quietly worked together to support Solidarity movement, which eventually led to Poland becoming a free nation.⁵²

During the first months of his administration Reagan attempted to reach out to the Holy See. He recognized the role that the Vatican could play to defeat Communism in Eastern Europe.

Ronald Reagan was very enthusiastic about his upcoming and historical meeting with the Pope John Paul II. Although, they have already had many contacts, it was the first time that they have met personally. As we read in a Memorandum for Mr. Robert G. McFarlane:

[t]he meeting of President Reagan with Pope John Paul II provides a rare opportunity to establish a development dialogue which could lead to important

⁴⁸ Kiron Skinner, Annelise Anderson and Martin Anderson, eds, *Reagan. In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan That Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: Touchstone, 2002), pp. 176–77.

⁴⁹ Paul Kengor, *The Crusader: Ronald Reagan and the Fall of Communism* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), p. 87.

⁵⁰ Peter Schweizer, *Reagan's War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph over Communism* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 173.

⁵¹ Richard Reeves, *President Reagan: The Triumph of Imagination* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), p. 108.

⁵² *Ronald Reagan 100 years*, Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation, Official Centennial Edition (New York: Harper Design, 2010), p.170.

common efforts between the Vatican and the United States to alleviate hunger, promote health initiatives and to emphasize to the world the importance of [economic] development to both the United States and the Vatican.⁵³

On 7 June 1982, the two men met face-to-face for the first time.⁵⁴ The pope and the president retired to the Vatican Library, where for fifty minutes they talked, just the two of them.

Carl Bernstein, an American journalist, who first wrote of U.S.–Vatican relations for *Time* magazine⁵⁵ in 1982—used the term of Holy Alliance. He described that Reagan and John Paul II undertook an extraordinary, coordinated campaign to defeat the communist government in Poland. According to Bernstein, however, the true start for the alliance was 7 June 1982 when Reagan visited the pope at the Vatican. However, in an interview for the University of Virginia's Miller Center, Richard Allen acknowledged that the phrase he used with Bernstein—'secret alliance'—may have given the wrong impression.

So my remark to Bernstein was, this was the greatest secret alliance of all times. It was secret from both sides, we meant to say. It wasn't secret by agreement, it was just a secret alliance, maybe a 'silent alliance' would have been better.⁵⁶

But there is an explanation for this 'cooperation that is far more plausible that a "conspiracy" or "deal": both Reagan and John Paul II were firmly anti-Communist, and they saw the Polish and European situations in much the same way'.⁵⁷ As George Weigel put it: 'if there was neither alliance nor conspiracy, there was a common purpose born of a set of shared convictions'.⁵⁸

⁵³ Memorandum for Mr. Robert G. McFarlane regarding 'An Initiative for the President's Meeting with pope John Paul II', Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Archives collection, April 1982, a copy in my collection; See, 'Remarks of the President and His Holiness the Pope Following their Meeting', The Papal Library, Vatican, 1982, my private copy.

⁵⁴ See, 'Remarks of the President and His Holiness the Pope Following their Meeting', The Papal Library: The Vatican, 7 June 1982, Vatican Library: Archives, Vatican Files, my private copy.

⁵⁵ Carl Bernstein, 'Holy Alliance', *Time* magazine, 24 February 1992, <https://time.com/archive/6719650/the-holy-alliance-ronald-reagan-and-john-paul-ii/>.

⁵⁶ Richard Allen, 'Richard Allen Oral History. Transcript', Miller Center at the University of Virginia, 28 May 2002, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/richard-allen-oral-history>.

⁵⁷ John O'Sullivan, *The President, the Pope and the Prime Minister* (Washington DC: Regnery Publishing Inc., 2008), p. 181.

⁵⁸ Weigel, *The President and the Pope*.

The fact that it was not a formal alliance in no way diminished the remarkable and historical relationship between the United States and the Vatican in the 1980s. As Bill Clark explained:

The two men shared the belief that atheistic communism lived a lie that, when fully understood, must ultimately fail [...]. Each was successful in translating a personal vision into an underlying policy and implementing the strategy to defeat Soviet aggression and oppression.⁵⁹

Each man believed that Solidarity could be the splinter to crack the Iron Curtain and help to topple Communism. As Bernstein stated:

Nobody believed the collapse of communism would happen this fast or on this timetable. But in their first meeting, the Holy Father and the President committed themselves and the institutions of the church and America to such a goal. And from that day, the focus was to bring it about in Poland.⁶⁰

The meeting of two powerful minds brought significant change into the world. Reagan and John Paul II certainly cooperated to help free Poland and Eastern Europe from Communism.

Once the Pontiff remarked:

Everybody knows the position of President Reagan as a great policy leader in world politics. My position was that of a pastor, the bishop of Rome, of one with responsibility for the Gospel, which certainly contains principles of the moral and social order and those regarding human rights [...] The Holy See's position, even in regard to my homeland, was guided by moral principle.⁶¹

Today we look into the past and clearly see that

[n]either the Pope's soft-power revolution nor Reagan's hard-power challenge could have done the job by itself. Each needed the other. Together, they provided the keys to victory. Without a formal coordination, even without very much discussion between the principles, Reagan and John Paul pursued, with astonishing success, parallel courses toward the same end: the defeat of Communism and the restoration of east-central Europe to freedom.⁶²

They both set a clear path toward the future, path that led them to tear down the Berlin Wall.

⁵⁹ Bernstein, 'The Holy Alliance', p. 30.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶¹ O'Sullivan, *The President*, p. 182.

⁶² Weigel, *The President and the Pope*, p. 2.

CONCLUSION

Diplomacy is, in a certain sense, the art of hope.
It lives from hope
and seeks to discern even its most tenuous signs.
Diplomacy must give hope.
Benedict XVI

The United States and the Holy See remains two of the most significant institutions in world history, one of beacon of democracy and other a sanctum of faith. Despite the obvious differences between them, both were founded on the idea that ‘human persons’ possess alienable natural rights granted by God. This has been a revolutionary concept when the Catholic Church embraced it 2,000 years ago, and when the Declaration of Independence stated it 1,800 years later.

As Ambassador Rooney stated:

Where the Holy See possesses leverage and tools unavailable to the United States—the unique ‘soft power’ of a sovereign lacking territorial or hegemonic agendas—the United States should encourage and assist the Holy See in putting forth its message. Likewise, as the only nation founded upon the alienable rights of humans, including the right to unfettered freedom, the United states merits the support and cooperation of the Holy See in advancing these shared values throughout the world.⁶³

The relations between the United States and the Holy See began soon after the establishment of the American Republic and continues. However, things were different in 1776, when the United States maintained reciprocal consular relations with the Papal States, and it has been a long road to where America is now.

Despite the challenges of the American Constitution, ambiguous relationship between Church and State, hostile position towards Catholics in early America, as well as limits on religious freedom, several US presidents have expressed an interest in establishing relations with the Holy See ‘recognizing that the importance of the Vatican’s political influence outweighs or otherwise goes beyond the Vatican’s religious personality’.⁶⁴

The successful collaboration between the United States and the Vatican on major international issues was attributable to different

⁶³ Rooney, *The Global Vatican*, p. 235.

⁶⁴ Bettwy, ‘United States-Vatican Recognition’, p. 265.

people, reasons, and circumstances. First, Nixon, Ford, Carter, and Reagan each developed mutual respect with the popes.

Nixon, in reestablishing official contacts through a special envoy with the Vatican in 1970, after a hiatus of twenty years, acknowledged the prestige and influence of the pope in international politics, and the Vatican reciprocated by providing unprecedented statesman and diplomatic courtesies.⁶⁵

To facilitate a meaningful relationship with Vatican, he established office in Rome, send Amb. Henry Cabot Lodge—an experienced statesman and diplomat—to provide support and continuity. Pope, Paul VI, expressed to Ford his support for the U.S. role in safeguarding the balance of power in Europe and for the consultations the US conducted with the Vatican on the Middle East peace process. The U.S-Vatican relations during the Carter administration has improved over a time. Carter's envoy to the Vatican, David Walters, was well received by the pope and the Curia. Also, for the first time in history, in January 1978, the Vatican's foreign minister was received at the U.S. Department of State for briefings and consultations with Secretary of State Vance. Carter's response to the event of mid-1978, and the presence of presidential delegation at the funeral and inaugurations of two popes, as well as personal engagement of Carter's National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski in contact with John Paul II and to advance U.S. foreign policy objectives, strengthened ties between the United States and the Vatican. Reagan and John Paul II was a perfect match. Reagan's personal faith as a Protestant and Pope John Paul II's and the president's mutual admiration and respect enabled the two leaders to form a strong cooperative geopolitical relationship. They both had similar goals in ending the Soviet regime in Eastern Europe—Poland in particular. As Edwin Meese, 75th United States Attorney General under Ronald Reagan, stresses,

[t]he two leaders were able to coordinate their efforts to put increasing political, economic and information pressure on the Soviet Union and general secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, which in the end helped bring about the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Peter Sarros, *U.S.-Vatican Relations, 1975–1980. A Diplomatic Study* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), p. 254; Jim Nicholson, *The United States and the Holy See. The Long Road* (Rome: La Cascina Group, 2002).

⁶⁶ Author's personal notes from the interview with Edwin Meese III during the conference: *Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II: The Partnership that Changed the World*, Washington DC, White House Writers Group, 19 February 2019.

These and other reasons 'placed the diplomatic move on far more solid ground in the eyes of Congress and the American people than on previous occasions when the proposal was raised in public'.⁶⁷

Undoubtedly, the credit for reestablishing full diplomatic relation between the US and the Holy See belongs to the former presidents of the United States, staff, and other people involved in it but President Ronald Reagan in particular. President Reagan established full diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1984 because, among other reasons, he realized that he could have no better partner than the Pope John Paul II in the fight against communism—and he was right. The support and help of John Paul II, support from within Reagan's own administration, power of the prayer, a non-activist federal court system, and overall strength and acceptance by the American people, permitted President Reagan to execute a long overdue diplomatic move of full recognition for the Vatican. Indeed, it was a great presidential move.

A second, among reasons for the amenity in US-Vatican relations was the pope's favorable and friendly attitude towards the US and its role in international relations. In general, previous popes saw America's—an example of power and free world—strong role in safeguarding the independence and freedom of Western Europe by blocking the further expansion of Soviet communism.

And last but not least, among different reasons for the strength of US-Vatican relations, it was well organized bilateral diplomacy based on the mutual respect of both actors, discretion, and confidentiality that helped provide better access to Vatican officials and an accommodation to the US representations.

The Holy See is a peerless and unquestionable source of information, a moral voice in the world of politics, vital venue to the hopes for a peaceful world, and a fantastic global arena to address the most important concerns of our humanity. The strategic value of America's relationship with the Holy See may not always be apparent but in a long term it is definitely of great potential value.

There is no doubt that *Santa Sede* is an unique partner for the United States strengthening its drive for freedom, justice, peace, and human dignity throughout the world. Establishing the full diplomatic relations between the US and the Holy See is a testimony to the collaborative role that President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II

⁶⁷ Peter K. Murphy, interview by William D. Morgan, 4 April 1994, *Frontline Diplomacy* [The U.S. Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection], CD-ROM (Arlington, VA, 2000), p. 49.

played in bringing down the Iron Curtain and freeing Europe and the world from Communism.

Finally, it is a reminder that it was the spiritual leader of the Catholic Church and the political leader of the free world who helped us rediscover the legacy of truth, courage, hope, freedom, moral clarity, and moral leadership bestowed upon us by those two extraordinary men with such a sense of purpose. And US-Vatican diplomacy proved to be an indispensable tool to that end.

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