The oldest institution on earth, the Roman Catholic Church sustains a far-flung flock whose approximately 1.3 billion adherents comprise more than one-sixth of the world’s population and half of all Christians. The tectonic shift of the world’s Catholic population to the ‘Global South’ has transformed the church into a truly global institution. In 1910 two-thirds of Catholics were Europeans; now over two-thirds live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with growth especially rapid in Africa (Pew, 2013; Agenzia Fides, 2022). Leadership of the church reflects this new global reality, not only in the person of Pope Francis but in the many cardinals he has appointed from across the world. Also crucial to understanding the church’s political role is its deep tradition of engagement with worldly affairs – a comfortableness with politics not shared by all religious faiths. These facts, combined with the visibility and popularity of Pope Francis, ensure the impact of the church in world politics.

The Catholic Church, however, defies easy political categorization. On the one hand, it remains a quintessentially conservative body with a hierarchical organisation to preserve traditional theological teachings. This impulse produces conservative stances on sexual morality, abortion, and marriage, and puts the church in alliance with other religious traditionalists, including Muslims. On the other hand, Catholic teachings on the dignity of the human person and the authenticity of the common good (Rerum Novarum, 1891) produce concern for the poor in the global economy and, especially in recent decades, advocacy of religious freedom, human rights, and democratic governance. Indeed, when the Church renounced state privilege and embraced religious freedom at Vatican II, it propelled the last great wave of democratization on earth (Huntington, 1991; Toft et al., 2011 Chapter 4). Thus, the church stands in seeming equipoise between contending impulses of tradition and modernity.

Despite this strategic position, the church faces challenges that can blunt its political impact. A shortage of priests and women religious (nuns and sisters) stretches church resources thin in some places, while elsewhere the church must sustain itself amidst syncretic influences of local cultures, desperate poverty, or hostile governments. More troubling, scandals involving clerical sex abuse of minors, sometimes going back decades, have undermined the public credibility of the church in a number of nations or drained its patrimony in expensive legal settlements. Because the church’s impact hinges on the vitality and trust it enjoys in societies, Catholic politics varies enormously by region, context, and issue.
This chapter begins by examining Vatican diplomacy and global initiatives, with emphasis on the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. This is followed by a discussion of Catholic politics in different regions of the world. The chapter concludes by examining issues that loom large on the horizon. The exploration of Catholicism, consequently, will provide a window into the broader and ever dynamic relationship between religion and politics in the contemporary world.

**Vatican diplomacy and Catholic global activism**

The Catholic Church is a unique multifarious institution. Headquartered at Vatican City, the Holy See retains remnants of state sovereignty, including an elaborate diplomatic structure that sends and receives ambassadors (Allen, 2004). But the church’s myriad institutions also function as interest groups or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that lobby governments or have observer status at the United Nations (Ferrari, 2006). Indeed, the Catholic Church encompasses a vast array of national or regional episcopal conferences, religious orders, relief and development organisations, charities, hospitals, and educational associations enmeshed in politics and government. Finally, as Vatican II declared, the church is also the ‘people of God’ (Philpott, 2005). Thus, to understand Catholicism and civic engagement, one must include the laity who populate Catholic organisations or participate as citizens in nearly 200 nations. This chapter explores the first of these roles, as captured under rubric of Vatican diplomacy, then touches on transnational global activism of other Catholic organisations.

As a transnational actor, the ‘Holy See directs a truly global church’ (Ferrari, 2006). Thus, it has both the tangible interests to defend and the religious values to promote at different times and in different settings. A major focus of papal initiatives in the past few decades has been human rights, particularly religious freedom. For John Paul II, this involved championing religious freedom behind the Iron Curtain, and then, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, to broader authoritarian contexts. In a widely cited speech before the Vatican diplomatic corps in 1996, for example, he sounded the clarion call against communist remnant and militant Islamic regimes that ‘practice discrimination against Jews, Christians, and other religious groups’. The Pope condemned such persecution as an ‘intolerable and unjustifiable’ violation ‘of the most fundamental human freedom, that of practising one’s faith openly, which for human beings is their reason for living’ (Pope John Paul II, 1996, paragraph 9).

More recently, the waxing of militant Islamist movements, imperilling the lives of Indigenous Christian communities, has captured the attention of popes and Vatican diplomats. Pope Benedict XVI took a particularly aggressive stance toward the Islamic world. Indeed, ‘as communism was to Pope John Paul II, so radical Islam is to Pope Benedict XVI’ (Bottum, 2006). His Regensburg speech on 12 September 2006 – in which he quoted a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor’s statement that Islam brought ‘things only evil and inhuman’ – created a firestorm in Muslim nations (Pope Benedict, 2006). Massive demonstrations, riots, and violent reprisals stunned the pontiff, who issued an apology and assured Muslims that the quote did not reflect his views. But Benedict did not back down on his demand for ‘reciprocity’ that Christians in Muslim nations be afforded the same rights to religious freedom that Muslims enjoy in the West, including the right ‘to propose and proclaim the Gospel’ to Muslims (Kahn and Meichtry, 2006). This position reflected an agreement among the cardinals of the church, whom Benedict had summoned on 23 March 2006, that persecution of Christians in the Islamic world required a sustained diplomatic push (Allen, 2006).

As conditions worsened for Christians and other minorities with the rise of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, Benedict’s successor, Pope Francis, responded with both public statements
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and dramatic gestures to challenge political leaders and enlist ecumenical allies for besieged Christians. During a visit to Turkey, he joined Patriarch Bartholomew I, leader of Orthodox Christianity, in pleading for religious freedom and protection for Christians in their homelands. In a conscious act of humility, the Pope ‘bowed before Bartholomew and asked for a blessing’, a gesture unprecedented in the thousand-year split between the two communions (Beliefnet, 2014). Francis also wrote an open letter to all the Christians in the Middle East, encouraging them in the extreme trials and persecution. Stressing inter-religious unity, he remarked, ‘The more difficult the situation, the more interreligious dialogue becomes necessary. There is no other way. Dialogue, grounded in an attitude of openness, in truth and love, is also the best antidote to the temptation to religious fundamentalism, which is a threat for followers of every religion’ (Pope Francis, 2014). The shocking beheading of the Egyptian Copts in Libya in February 2015 aroused Francis to issue heartfelt prayers for ‘our brother Copts’ and to speak of a new ‘ecumenism of blood’. By this evocative theological language, Francis suggested that the blood of disparate Christians is mixed in modern martyrdom (The Economist, 2015).

Human trafficking into sexual exploitation and slave labour has emerged as a major focus of the Vatican. Based on his first-hand work in the slums of Buenos Aires, Pope Francis has invested considerable personal leadership on the issue. Just two months into his papacy, Francis sent a handwritten note to the chancellor of his scholarly academies requesting an examination of ‘human trafficking and modern slavery’. In response the pontifical academies convened scholars, medical professionals, law enforcement experts, and activists to provide detailed recommendations for the church, governments, and global institutions (Pontifical Academies of Sciences and Social Sciences and the Federation Internationale des Associations De Medecins Catholiques, 2013). Guided by this initiative, Pope Francis joined with the archbishop of Canterbury in launching the Global Freedom Network to fight against ‘new forms of enslavement’ (Winfield, 2014). Francis also convened an unprecedented gathering of religious leaders at the Vatican – representing Catholic, Anglican, Orthodox, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish faiths – who issued a joint declaration to end slavery (Barrett, 2014). These Vatican initiatives link up with a growing network of Catholic NGOs and national church institutions that confront trafficking syndicates and offer succour to victims.

Concern about the plight of the world’s destitute has led the Vatican to champion efforts to ameliorate poverty. Agencies like Caritas, Catholic Relief Services, and Jesuit Refugee Services work in some of the harshest places on earth and funnel information and policy recommendations to the Vatican. One example of this cooperation includes debt relief, which is particularly pressing in poor African countries whose debt service payments crowded out expenditures for education, health care, and economic development. Catholic development agencies and advocates joined alliances to press governments and international financial institutions to write off burdensome debts. Pope John Paul II capitalised on the turn of the millennium in 2000 to endorse the biblically evocative ‘Year of Jubilee’ campaign, which achieved considerable success (Hertzke, 2004).

Coming from the developing world, Pope Francis has intensified Vatican attention to the poor, signalling that their cause will lie at the centre of his papacy. Indeed, all aspects of his papacy seem to converge to a theology of the poor, to a radical identification with the destitute and exploited and a simultaneous challenge to those with economic resources and political power to do far more than provide alms. Choosing as his namesake St. Francis, he has chided the princes of the church to abandon their privileges and cast their lot with the poor. He has written that the heart of the gospel is radically for the marginalized. In an apostolic exhortation he wrote that ‘God’s heart has a special place for the poor, so much so that he himself became poor’ through an emptying Kenosis, such that the ‘entire history of our redemption is marked
by the presence of the poor’ (Evangelii Gaudium, 2014, p. 197). Francis instantiated this concern by repeatedly remonstrating with political and business leaders to ameliorate inequalities, end exploitation of poor workers or marginalization of castoffs in the global economy, and by appointing bishops in developing nations who reflect this conviction.

Concern for the environment has increasingly engaged the Holy See. From the 1970s onward successive popes condemned ecological destruction and called for economic and moral transformations that would enhance care for creation. This concern reached its climax in the papacy of Pope Francis, who drew upon his scholarly academies to produce the landmark encyclical, Laudato Si, a long and detailed analysis of global environmental degradation, with particular attention to climate change as ‘a global problem with grave implications’. In this encyclical, the Pope also linked the state of the global environment to the plight of the poor. He lamented that many ‘poor live in areas particularly affected . . . [and] . . . have no other financial activities or resources which can enable them to adapt’. Citing ‘widespread indifference to such suffering’, he charged that ‘those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms’ (Laudato Si, 2015, paragraph 25). Thus, development strategies must simultaneously provide uplift for the poor and care for creation (Rivkin, 2015).

Fateful issues of war and peace have led recent Popes to challenge the resort to military force in settling international disputes, while Vatican diplomats and Catholic lay organizations have engaged in mediation initiatives. During the run-up to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 Pope John Paul II echoed the American bishops in challenging its justification (Allen, 2004, chapter 7). Pope Francis, in turn, called upon world powers not to intervene militarily in the civil war in Syria (Zavis, 2013). More recently, in 2021 Pope Francis denounced both the American intervention in Afghanistan as ‘irresponsible policy’ and lamented that the chaotic US withdrawal did not take into account all ‘eventualities’ (Povoledo, 2021).

Beyond rhetorical denunciations of war, Pope Francis has sought to reconcile people and nations (Yardley, 2014). This manifested itself most dramatically in the key role he played in the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba. Not only did the Pope send letters to both President Obama and President Castro inviting rapprochement, but he also convened a secret meeting between the two countries at the Vatican that facilitated diplomatic openings (Yardley and Pianigiani, 2014). The Holy Father also strove to reconcile relations between Palestine and Israel. In 2014 the pontiff hosted President Shimon Peres of Israel and Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine at the Vatican for a ‘Prayer Summit’ emphasizing common humanity and forgiveness (Booth, 2014).

The shocking Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, produced an agonizing series of contradictory responses by Pope Francis and halting diplomatic forays by the Vatican. Critics inside and outside of the church discerned an ambivalent papal voice in the face of Russia’s blatant aggression and indiscriminate killing of Ukrainian civilians (Weigel, 2022). The Pope condemned the war in general terms but did not call out Putin as the aggressor and demurred on whether Ukrainian military actions represented legitimate defence (Horowitz, 2022). More striking, the Pope suggested that ‘NATO barking at Russia’s gate’ may have provoked Putin, leading to fierce criticism that Francis was blaming the victim and sending a ‘terrible moral signal to dictators’ (Editorial Board, 2022). Even sympathetic observers called upon the pontiff ‘to speak the truth about the murderous assault on Ukraine’ (NRC Staff, 2022).

One explanation for the papal equivocation lay in the Vatican’s effort to keep a neutral posture for a potential mediating role (White, 2022). A more profound reason seems to be a longer-term evolution of the Holy See’s posture toward war. From Pacem in Terris (1963) to Fratelli Tutti (2020) the church has moved away from its classic Just War tradition that provided moral
justification for defensive military combat under rigorously limited circumstances. Faced with the threat of nuclear Armageddon in the 1960s, Pope John XXIII offered a sweeping vision of a new era of international relations in which societies and states eradicate the conditions that give rise to war and called into question the church’s traditional teaching that distinguished just from unjust wars (*Pacem in Terris*, 1963). Pope John Paul II, in turn, questioned whether modern warfare could meet the criteria of just war and erected a high moral threshold for the use of force (Christiansen, 2006). More forcefully, Pope Francis suggested that the church’s teaching on the legitimate use of military force was dated. ‘We can no longer think of war as a solution because its risks will probably always be greater than its supposed benefits. In view of this, it is very difficult nowadays to invoke the rational criteria elaborated in earlier centuries to speak of the possibility of a “just war”. Never again war!’ (*Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, paragraph 258).

Measured against the church’s traditional teaching, however, one could hardly find a starker violation of *jus ad bellum* (just resort to war) and *jus in bello* (just means in fighting war) than Russia’s invasion and documented war crimes. In turn, the Ukrainian military response seemed a textbook example of just defensive war and just means in pursuing it. This has led prominent Catholic scholars to call for the church to reclaim its *just war* theory (Desch, 2022).

One of the most striking peacemaking initiatives in the Catholic world involves a Catholic lay organization, the Community of Sant’Egidio, headquartered in Rome but with some 50,000 members spread over 70 countries. Inspired by the gospel mandate to extend radical friendship to the poor and outcast in every land, its members enjoy the trust of diverse actors, from government officials to civil society actors and dissidents. This trust enabled its members, quite unexpectedly, to mediate an end to the civil war in Mozambique in 1992, which then led to subsequent major roles in mediating conflicts in Algeria, Uganda, Kosovo, Guatemala, and Liberia (Toft et al., 2011, Chapter 7). This unusual outcome flows from the ability of the organization to blend local relationships with global Catholic networks.

One area of unambiguous Vatican advocacy concerns migrants and refugees. Pope Francis expressed this concern in his 2020 encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* (‘All brothers’). In it, he refers to migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees more than 30 times, rivalling only his references to the poor. He specifically calls for more humane policies to deal with the migration crisis, which he sees as threatened by ‘myopic, extremist, resentful, and aggressive nationalism’ (*Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, paragraph 11).

If the church has taken ‘progressive’ positions on human rights, poverty, the environment, and war, it remains a traditional body when it comes to the constellation of issues surrounding abortion, human sexuality, AIDS prevention, contraception, marriage, and the family. Because the Vatican and Catholic NGOs have Observer Status at the United Nations – allowing them to speak but not vote at the UN General Assembly – and other international forums, the church remains an active presence in these debates. At population summits, for example, the church has clashed with western nations and feminist organisations over their advocacy of abortion access (Cowell, 1994). With respect to certain forms of sex education and contraceptive services to adolescents, the church has fought against bypassing parents by emphasising rights and responsibilities of families. Church officials fear that the approach of liberal NGOs undermines traditional morality and promotes sexual permissiveness that leads to the abuse of girls and women (Crossette, 1994). During the papacy of Pope Benedict, the church condemned the ‘condom message’ of AIDS activists, pointing to abstinence and fidelity in marriage as the only sure ways to prevent the spread of the disease (BBC News, 2005). Finally, in the face of rapidly changing attitudes on gay rights, the church has fought against same-sex marriage laws, invoking its teaching on the divinely ordained nature of the male-female union and the social benefits of traditional family bonds.
While these positions put the church squarely in opposition to liberalising social trends, it has joined progressive allies in calling for more spending on AIDS medical treatment, promoting access to education for girls and women, and expanding economic opportunity for the poor, which it sees as the most efficacious means of stabilizing populations.

Moreover, Pope Francis introduced a dramatic new tone to these debates. In a lengthy interview, he admitted that he intended to talk less about abortion, contraception, and homosexuality, warning the church against becoming ‘obsessed’ with dogmas to the exclusion of love, especially for the poor (Spadaro, 2013). Moreover, in response to a journalist’s question on homosexual priests, Francis responded with a question that shocked Catholic traditionalists: ‘If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?’ (Donadio, 2013). But while Francis has indicated openness to the possibility of civil unions for gay couples, he has not fundamentally changed the church’s opposition to the re-definition of marriage to include same-sex partners. Indeed, a synod of cardinals convened to discuss controversies over the family produced a report which, while ‘welcoming homosexual persons’ nonetheless depicted gay partnerships as ‘imperfect’ and stressed that ‘unions between people of the same sex cannot be considered on the same footing as matrimony between man and woman’ (Wofford, 2014). This position puts Catholic institutions in some countries in jeopardy of running afoul of new anti-discrimination laws that sanction refusal to recognize same-sex marriages.

We now turn to the diverse examples of political engagement by the church in different regions of the world.

Europe: Christian roots and secularisation

Europe was once the Catholic heartland, and the church played an influential role in statecraft. That has changed, as church growth has shifted to the developing world of the Global South, and the Catholic percentage of European population has declined. But it is useful to highlight the contributions of Catholicism to the political scene of Europe.

One of several key contributions involved the formation of the Christian Democratic parties that played a crucial, even if unheralded, role in building stable democracies in Western Europe after World War II. Inspired by Catholic social teaching on human dignity, lay intellectuals and activists in Europe pressed for democracy and human rights, in some cases pushing the envelope further than the church’s official position. A leading figure was Jacques Maritain (1882–1973), who helped lay the intellectual foundations for the Christian Democratic movement. In particular, he developed the doctrine of ‘Thomistic personalism’, a view of the human person as naturally embedded in organic institutions of society, such as family, church, community, or guild (Maritain, 1943). Although not explicitly planned by the church, the emergent Christian Democratic parties drew heavily upon the doctrine of subsidiarity – that the state should support, not supplant, these natural societal institutions. Guided by this vision, Christian Democratic parties enacted family and church-friendly social welfare policies. Thus, while often depicted as the main ‘conservative’ opposition to social democratic parties, the Christian Democratic movement in fact represented a distinct blend of traditional and progressive elements. A genuine international movement, Christian Democratic parties went on to help consolidate democracy in several Latin American nations (Kalyvas, 1996; Papini, 1997).

In Eastern Europe, the story of how the church helped undermine communism is well known (Weigel, 2005). Not only in Poland, but in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in Eastern Europe, congregations became places where people could begin to freely express themselves. This shielded religious and secular dissidents alike, who developed trust and solidarity through religious rituals that took on political significance (Havel, 1990).
With the collapse of communism, the Vatican shifted focus to battling secularising trends. When John Paul II returned to democratic Poland, for example, he chided the people for rising consumerism and materialism. Cardinal Ratzinger, in a homily to the conclave that elected him Pope, denounced ‘the dictatorship of relativism’ (Ratzinger, 2005), and as Pontiff, frequently called upon Europeans to return to their Christian roots. This took tangible form in deliberations over the constitution of the European Union, in which the Vatican backed language that would explicitly acknowledge the Christian heritage of Europe, but only gained watered-down reference to the cultural, religious, and humanist inheritance of Europe.

The rise of populist nationalism in Europe has fractured the Christian Democratic consensus and produced competing Catholic responses. Catholic integralists in Hungary, Poland, and elsewhere have sought stronger ties between the church and state, while their Catholic constituencies have sometimes backed anti-immigrant policies, especially targeting Muslim migrants from the Middle East and North Africa. This directly challenges the Vatican’s support for humane policies toward migrants. The shock of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, however, sparked unprecedented European solidarity to defend Ukraine and provide succor to its swelling refugee population. Catholic actors emerged as pivotal players in this drama, as international Catholic NGOs, already stretched by humanitarian crises elsewhere, have responded with millions in aid to refugees. But the most striking role for Catholicism has been Catholic Poland’s welcoming of some 3.5 million Ukrainian refugees, entailing huge initiatives by the government, Catholic charities, and average Polish citizens to provide housing, services, and even employment for the refugees. This hospitable response concords with the sentiments of Pope Francis and seems to have undermined, for the moment, some of the nativist impulses afflicting Eastern Europe in recent years (CNA Staff, 2022).

Throughout Europe, the Vatican also fought (largely unsuccessful) battles against socially liberal policies, such as legal abortion, same-sex marriage or civil unions, stem-cell research, and euthanasia. While Pope Francis has not departed fundamentally from his predecessors on these questions, his re-orienting emphasis on the crisis of the marginalized has fostered new goodwill for the church on the continent. His dramatic gestures (such as the tradition of washing the feet of prisoners on Holy Thursday) evoke an approach to evangelization rooted in an ideal of sacrificial service rather than doctrine. Whether his enormous popularity will translate into renewal remains a question.

The United States: robust presence and emerging challenges

The Catholic Church represents ‘a distinct voice’ in American politics (Steinfels, 2004). It joins conservatives in defending traditional marriage, opposing abortion, and supporting conscience protections for religious health care providers. But it also unites with liberals in backing humanitarian foreign aid, health care for the poor, social welfare spending, increases in the minimum wage, humane treatment of immigrants, and opposition to the death penalty.

Because of this unique ideological blend, Catholics have become the quintessential swing voters in American politics, a strategic voting block assiduously courted by both political parties. Over a fifth of the US electorate, Catholics comprise the median voting group whose movement often provides the decisive margin of victory in national elections, with Hispanic Catholic voters more Democratic and white Catholics more Republican. In the 2020 election, Catholic Joe Biden evenly split the Catholic vote with Donald Trump, a significant improvement over Democratic nominee Hilary Clinton’s share in 2016 (Igielnik, Keeter, and Hartig, 2021).

Catholics in America also operate an impressive array of institutions, including the nation’s paramount parochial school system, a large hospital network, extensive charities and adoption
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agencies, diverse religious orders, along with national and state Catholic conferences. The shock of the Supreme Court’s Roe v. Wade decision in 1973 legalising abortion spurred an extensive pro-life network in the church, which continues to provide the most vigorous institutional support for limits on abortion. A growing critique of public schools, especially their perceived failure to adequately serve the poor, led to increased attention to the ways parochial schools compensated for family deficits (Colman and Hoffer, 1987), producing alliances with both home-schooling evangelicals and inner-city Black people for various ‘school choice’ initiatives.

From the 1980s onward, the devolution of policymaking authority to the states has enhanced the role of state Catholic conferences, which are permanent agencies composed of dioceses often headed by a lay executive director. In most states, these conferences are often the most well-established and influential religious advocacy presence – but in characteristic fashion, blend culturally conservative stands with economically progressive positions (Yamane, 2005).

A crucial challenge to this distinct Catholic voice is the growing polarization of American politics, which pushes citizens into mutually hostile partisan camps, reinforced by the ideological echo chambers of cable and social media outlets, not to mention the vitriolic presence of former president Donald Trump. This polarization has divided the laity in congregations and pushed Catholic leaders into seeming alignment with one side or the other, depending on circumstances.

An assertive social liberalism during the Obama years, for example, pushed the bishops into the traditionalist camp in defence of church autonomy and conscience rights. Catholic institutions joined other religious traditionalists to resist mandates to include contraceptives and sterilization in their health plans, producing prodigious litigation battles pitting government agencies against Catholic charities, religious orders, and colleges seeking conscience exemption from such mandates (Hertzke, 2015, ‘Introduction’).

Moreover, when same-sex marriage was established as a right by the courts, non-discrimination statutes have been applied to church institutions, forcing them to choose between defying the law or violating their teaching on marriage. Long-standing Catholic adoption programs in Massachusetts, Washington, DC, and Illinois shut down because authorities insisted that they place children with same-sex couples. In the face of these converging challenges, the bishops launched national educational campaigns to defend religious freedom and rights of conscience (Hertzke and Pudlo, 2014).

During the Trump years, however, American Catholic bishops became visible opponents of the president’s harsh rhetoric and policies toward migrants, in particular condemning the Trump policy of separating immigrant children from parents at the border (Roewe, 2018). Pope Francis endorsed the American bishops’ position, which was widely seen as influencing the Trump administration to reverse its family separation policies (Horowitz, 2018).

In the early years of the Biden presidency, the American bishops have generally been supportive of the administration’s international engagement, immigration posture, progressive economic and tax policies, and climate mitigation strategies. The overturn of Roe v. Wade, however, by returning abortion policy-making to the states, pits church leaders and pro-life activists against pro-choice liberals, creating tensions for Catholic progressives in the pews and pressure on Catholic politicians in the Democratic Party. We see hints of what is to come in proclamations by a few conservative bishops that they will refuse communion to prominent pro-choice Catholic politicians, such as President Biden or former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, while other bishops continue to invite them to the sacramental table. The decentralization of pastoral authority by local bishops creates the odd situation in which Pelosi, for example, can be denied communion in San Francisco (by her conservative local bishop) but invited to the eucharist in
Washington, DC, where the bishop has taken ‘a more dialogic approach to the abortion dispute’ (Allen, 2022).

Such division and confusion do not augur well for sustaining a distinct Catholic leaven in American politics, but a tincture of hope lies in a younger generation of Catholics who seem devout in their orthodoxy but less interested in fighting culture wars.

**Latin America: democracy and development**

The most significant story from Latin America is, of course, the elevation of Argentine Cardinal Bergoglio of Buenos Aires to the seat of St. Peter, producing ecstatic responses of cultural pride. As the first Pope from Latin America, Francis brings a distinct focus on poverty, mercy, and a new evangelization in the face of competition, and he has appointed bishops and cardinals in the region who reflect this focus.

Latin America contains the largest regional Catholic population, comprising some 39% of all the world’s Catholics (Pew 2013). For nearly five centuries the Catholic Church backed authoritarian regimes and economic oligarchs in Latin America. This makes the transformation of the Church following Vatican II especially noteworthy. Many bishops, priests, and religious women opposed dictatorships, shielded dissidents, and fought for human rights. Papal nuncios in turn provided international legitimacy of such efforts, helping to lead a wave of democratisation in the last few decades.

An excellent example is Brazil, by population the largest Catholic country in the world. For centuries, the Church tied itself to wealthy landowners and authoritarian rulers who granted it vast privileges. But by the 1960s, a progressive episcopate embraced the aspirations of the poor and offered the most prominent challenge to despotic military rule. By providing space for civil society and undermining the legitimacy of the regime, the Church helped midwife democratisation (Casanova, 1994; Huntington, 1991).

To be sure, democratization in Latin America was uneven, and Church support for authoritarianism endured until recently in a few countries, such as Argentina, Honduras, and Uruguay. One explanation for this variability is that the Church changed the least where it faced little competition, either from Protestant growth or secular movements (Gill, 1998).

Linked to its democratic role was the Church’s embrace of justice for rural peasantry and urban poor. Vatican II highlighted the enormous inequalities in the global economy and questioned the justice of destitution amidst unprecedented wealth. This theme emerged at meetings of the Latin American Bishop’s Conference (CELAM) in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and Pueblo, Mexico in 1979. Church leaders articulated the widely influential idea that public policies should be guided by a ‘preferential option for the poor’.

This idea, of course, was bolstered by liberation theology, which applied the analysis of class conflict to press for radical changes in societal structures that would end exploitation of the destitute (Gutierrez, 1973). While many bishops may not have embraced the ‘Marxist methodology of liberation theologians’, as Anthony Gill observes, ‘they could not but help to reflect upon their critiques of Latin American society and perhaps arrive at less radical, but still progressive conclusions’ (Gill, 1998, 45). So, whether influenced by Vatican II, CELAM conferences, or liberation theology, Church leaders in many cases became champions of the dispossessed.

Of course, the Marxist dimension of liberation theology troubled the Catholic hierarchy. By the 1980s, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had condemned liberation theology as a ‘fundamental threat’ to the Church and silenced Brazilian friar Leonardo Boff, a leading figure in the movement. Despite this assault, liberation theology lingers among a cadre of priests and lay Catholics, who seek structural changes in confronting desperate poverty (Reel, 2005).
Pope Francis appears to draw from this wellspring in his critique of the global economy, of the inequality that represents a denial of the dignity of all persons. Chastising the ‘new idolatry of money’, he challenges ‘trickle-down theories’ as expressing a ‘naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power’ (Evangelii Gaudium, 2014, para 54–55). His conviction that neoliberal economic trends leave too many in a destitute existence echoes themes of liberation theology, perhaps without the Marxism.

But while the Pope may be popular in Latin America, the Church has lost significant portions of its flock to Pentecostalism or secularism. Its diminished influence is also reflected in the fact that ‘countries in the region have been so quick to adopt laws legalizing abortion, gay marriage, and the decriminalization of marijuana’ (Gomez, 2014). In some countries, such as Argentina and Chile, scandals involving sex abuse of minors by prominent clerics have seriously damaged the Church and its political influence. In Chile, this reckoning meant far less capacity to defend its interests and perspectives on marriage, education, abortion, and religious freedom during the process of drafting a new constitution dominated by more secular or left-wing actors (San Martin, 2022).

Africa: Catholic leaven in struggles

The Catholic Church has experienced dramatic growth in sub-Saharan Africa, from a tiny presence in 1900 to over 170 million by 2010, or 16% of the globe’s Catholic population (Pew Research Centre, 2013). At least four African nations are at or near majority Catholic population, while another five are at least 40% Catholic (Pew-Templeton Global Futures Project, 2016). Not only is growth accelerating and outstripping other parts of the world, but Africa is producing so many priests that they are being sent to take over churches in the United States and Europe (Nossiter, 2013).

As an independent sector of civil society, the church has promoted democratization across the continent, from South Africa to Uganda. Catholic schools and universities often educated democratic reformers, and Catholic leaders sometimes engaged in direct democratization efforts. In Malawi the Catholic bishops distributed a pastoral letter that criticised the one-party rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda, which was the ‘turning point’ in that nation’s democratization. The church likewise led popular opposition movements against authoritarianism in Kenya, Zambia, and Ghana (Philpott, 2005). In war-torn Congo (with approximately half of its population Roman Catholic), church leaders have striven to provide a forum for reconciliation as a means of promoting peace and democratic transition (Elenga, 2006). The bishops’ conference also deployed observers and condemned as tainted the election that returned President Joseph Kabila to power in 2011 (BBC News, 2012).

The church often provides vital educational and health services where governments are either ineffective or corrupt. In Angola, the church transformed itself from a virtual appendage of Portuguese colonizers into a truly independent force. As the nation recovered from civil war, in the new century the church became a ‘surrogate state’, managing a network of schools and charities, operating the country’s premier radio station, and serving as a potent ‘political leader in an independent Angola’ (Heywood, 2006). In Nigeria the church also compensates for state weakness or corruption, particularly in the face of the Boko Haram insurgency in the north. Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto of northwestern Nigeria observed that the ‘entire architecture of governance has collapsed. The church remains the only moral force’ (Nossiter, 2013).

Catholic development organisations in Africa have also been drawn into peacemaking initiatives. In 2015, strife in the Central African Republic (CAR) spawned violence by Christian militias against Muslims, resulting in the destruction of numerous mosques and a massive exodus of Muslim refugees. In response, Catholic Relief Services collaborated with Muslim groups in mediating initiatives to quell the violence and promote reconciliation (Bryson, 2015).
In no place has the church’s engagement been deeper than in South Sudan, the world’s newest nation and one of the most fragile. For two decades (1993–2003) the formerly Islamist regime of Sudan waged a scorched earth war against the nation’s ethnic Africans of the south, comprised mostly of Christians and tribal religionists. Indigenous Catholic bishops, working with global church leaders and activist lay Catholics in the US, played an important role in the coalition that induced the US government to pressure Khartoum to sign a peace treaty with the southern rebel movement, which ultimately led to independence for the new nation of South Sudan 2011 (Hertzke, 2004, Chapter 7). International Catholic development agencies, such as Caritas and Catholic Relief Services, invested heavily in the fragile new country. But the country was too fragile to hold. A power struggle between political and tribal rivals, President Salva Kiir (a Dinka), and Vice President Riek Machar (a Nuer), erupted into widespread tribal violence and armed insurrection, sparking massive displacement, disease, and famine. Seeking to mediate the conflict, local Catholic bishops enlisted the personal intervention of Pope Francis, who invited the rivals to a ‘spiritual retreat for peace’ at the Vatican on the eve of Holy Week in 2019. In a dramatic gesture, the Pope knelt and kissed the feet of each of the antagonists, Kiir and Machar, imploring them to end the conflict. This stunning example of papal diplomacy spurred, or shamed, the antagonists to commit to a power-sharing pact in 2020, negotiated under UN auspices (Hertzke, 2020). Failure of rivals to implement the pact, along with continued tribal violence and corruption, spurred the pontiff to travel to South Sudan on a “Pilgrimage of Peace” in February of 2023. During his visit Pope Francis sharply rebuked Sudanese leaders for corruption, called upon militias to disarm, and pleaded for a country-wide process of reconciliation and forgiveness (Pullella and Wudu, 2023; Walsh and Horowitz 2023).

Uganda, which is over 40% Catholic (Pew-Templeton Global Futures Project, 2016) suffered through a different crucible. During the reign of terror of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Northern Uganda, the church provided centres of refuge for children threatened with abduction. In turn, the Community of Sant’Egidio helped broker peace talks with the LRA that ended the civil war (Toft et al., 2011, p. 189). In the aftermath of the conflict, the Uganda church established programs of rehabilitation to help former child soldiers to reintegrate into society. This account underscores both the indigenous resources of the church and the benefits of transnational networks.

While these illustrations show the church’s influence, elsewhere ‘Catholics proved ineffective as brokers of democracy’, particularly in Rwanda (Philpott, 2005, pp. 110–111). Rwanda, whose population is roughly half Roman Catholic, represents an example of abject failure to overcome tribal conflicts. The roots of this failure lie in the fact that the church colluded with Belgian colonisers, who employed a deliberate policy of playing the Tutsis and Hutus against each other. This had devastating consequences in 1994 when Hutu forces inaugurated a genocidal campaign against Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Not only did the church not systematically protest the genocide, but some Catholic priests participated in the atrocities, their sanctuaries becoming killing fields. Even after the killing ended, Rwandan Catholic leaders continued to downplay the massacres and refused to acknowledge their complicity and failure. Though some observers hold out hope that the church can still engage in truth and reconciliation processes, its mission has been seriously discredited, opening the way for evangelical Protestant competitors to move into the social and moral void (Rutagambwa, 2006).

Asia: a quest for civil society

With its huge population and geographic reach, Asia presents a multifaceted setting for Catholic political engagement. Despite diverse nationalities and forms of government, the quest to carve spaces for itself in civil society is a consistent thread throughout the region.
For example, with a growing Catholic population in Taiwan and South Korea, the church nurtured dissent against authoritarian regimes and helped to encourage democratisation in the two states. Remarkably in South Korea, Catholic Kim Dae-jung, who fought a life-long democracy campaign, used church settings to arouse the citizenry against South Korea’s military dictatorships. He was twice imprisoned and even sentenced to death in 1980. The intervention of the US led to his release and exile; his subsequent return to South Korea intensified pro-democracy forces (Huntington, 1991). He was elected in 1997 and earned the Nobel peace prize in 2000 for his role in democratising the nation.

Similarly, in the Philippines the church fostered the central opposition to the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos. This began in earnest in the early 1980s with a series of pastoral letters from the bishops’ conference critical of the regime, which prepared the ground for the ‘people power’ revolution of 1986. Under pressure from the church, Marcos called a ‘snap election’ designed to ‘throw the opposition off balance’. But Cardinal Jaime Sin and other bishops frustrated Marcos by in effect backing the candidacy of Cory Aquino, wife of the assassinated opposition leader Ninoy Aquino. The bishops then condemned widespread voting fraud that initially gave the election to Marcos. Finally, in one of the most dramatic episodes in Philippine history, the church called out hundreds of thousands of Filipinos to flood the streets and protect with their bodies military officers who joined the Aquino forces. Under pressure from the church and the US government, Marcos resigned, and Aquino assumed the presidency (Wooster, 1994). The church continues to play an active role in the nation, supporting initiatives for the poor and challenging corruption.

Another example of where the church became tied up in a people’s cause was East Timor. For centuries the church served colonial power, but the invasion by Indonesia in 1975 severed the church from the government and ironically freed priests to lead the popular struggle against occupation. As the interests of the church and the indigenous population merged, affiliation with Catholicism mushroomed. In 1973 less than a third of the population was Catholic; by 1990 that figure was an astonishing 90%. Under international pressure, Indonesia agreed to a referendum on independence in 1999. Its passage resulted in violent reprisals by Indonesian military troops and militia, in which some priests and nuns were killed. This brought new pressure on the Indonesian government, which withdrew its troops and recognized East Timor independence. The church now focuses on rebuilding community structures shattered by occupation and war (Lyon, 2007).

Asia contains most of the world’s remaining communist states: China, Vietnam, Laos, and North Korea. North Korea, which crushes religion with some of the worst persecution on earth, is sui generis, and there the church barely clings to life. Internationally, however, Catholics have taken up the cause of refugees who have fled the totalitarian regime, putting pressure on China to cease deporting or exploiting them.

Elsewhere in Asia the church strives for independence from communist authorities, who seek to keep power by controlling nascent civil society. In Vietnam, unified church leaders have adroitly engaged with the communist authorities to carve spaces for independent religious life, winning some concessions to operate churches and societal ministries (Reimer, 2016). Greater repression in China, on the other hand, has produced a persecuted and divided church. Underground Catholics who pledge fealty to Rome risk harassment or arrest by authorities, and they often disdain those who worship in state-sanctioned ‘patriotic’ congregations. Wanting to unite both state-sanctioned and ‘underground’ Catholics, the Vatican signed a controversial protocol with the regime in 2018, establishing a ‘collaboration’ on the appointment of bishops, including a veto by the Pope over candidates proposed by the regime (Holy See Press Office, 2018; McCallister, 2018). This delicate minuet of secret negotiations, however, did not stem...
a rising wave of repression and surveillance against the church, including the arrest of a retired cardinal in Hong Kong (Ramzy and May, 2022), leading to recriminations by some Chinese and western Catholic leaders that the Vatican was undercutting Chinese Catholics most loyal to the Holy See (Crux Staff, 2020; Weigel, 2020). Continuing repression and division will likely inhibit church growth in China and hamper the church’s ability to foster independent civil society (Madsen, 1998; Reardon, 2006).

Crisis for Christianity in the Middle East

The seizure of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, by Islamic State militants in the summer of 2014 stunned the world. Especially shocking was their brutal efficiency in killing or expelling the entire Christian population from the city and the wider Nineveh plain. This event captured the existential peril facing Christians and other minorities in the region. The chaotic wake of the American-led overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq exposed vulnerable Christian communities to sectarian assaults and systematic Islamist terror. The crisis accelerated with the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Perhaps only a third of the Christian population remains in Iraq, as Christians in the entire region continue to flee their ancient homeland (Barber, 2016).

Christianity in the Middle East is composed of distinct communities and traditions, from Orthodox to Eastern Rite to Catholic. Nonetheless, Catholic leaders, drawing upon transnational networks, have emerged as the most visible advocates for the besieged faithful. Patriarch Louis Raphaël I Sako, head of Iraq’s Chaldean Catholic community, is the singular example. Before the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, he sounded the alarm about the perilous situation for Christians in Iraq (Allen, 2013). Since the fall of Mosul, he has become a singular spokesman for Christians and other minorities. In a speech before the UN Security Council, he proclaimed that Islamist extremist groups were ‘erasing all traces’ of non-Muslims in the region, and he pleaded with world leaders to take coordinated action to protect the remnant (Brown, 2015). Illustrating the potent global linkages of the church, Pope Francis personally called Patriarch Sako in 2014 to express his solidarity with Iraqi Christians and endorsed international action to protect them (Vatican Radio, 2014). Four years later the pontiff made Sako a Cardinal, dramatically elevating his voice within the Church (Brockhaus, 2018).

Beyond advocacy, the church faces the striking challenge of serving a growing refugee population in Kurdistan, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, and reconstituting the Assyrian diaspora into functioning communities. This will require both the generosity from the global church and creative indigenous leadership.

Conclusion: to the future

As this discussion indicates, the Catholic Church will remain a strategic actor in national and global politics. Its effectiveness, however, will depend on its vitality as a religious institution, and that will vary from region to region, nation to nation. The challenges it confronts, in turn, will vary enormously. The millennia-old challenge of libertas ecclesiae, protecting the freedom of the church from state intrusion, remains an urgent goal in authoritarian contexts but is also re-emerging in the West as aggressive secular policies threaten to undermine the autonomy of religious institutions. Thus, the church and its leaders will continue to be significant voices in promoting religious freedom.

With the continued shift of the Catholic population to the Global South, the church will find itself heavily nested among the world’s poor, exploited, and displaced. This demographic reality not only produces a concordance with the emphasis of Pope Francis on being a church of and for
the poor but will profoundly shape the context for future pontiffs. One of the striking trends is the
sizeable number of Catholics among the world’s refugees, migrants, and exiles. From Christians
expelled in Middle East, to desperate Central American migrants, to refugees displaced by strife
in South Sudan, Nigeria, or the Congo, many live in a diaspora church – in refugee camps, as
sojourners on the move with few possessions, or as undocumented migrant workers vulnerable to
exploitation. Such evocative biblical images pose a serious test of whether affluent and comfort-
able laity in the West will respond with commensurate compassion and advocacy.

Finally, the looming bio-genetic revolution will present new challenges to basic theological
understandings of the unique giftedness of persons made in the image and likeness of God. Though
hardly on the political radar, genetic engineering poses profound questions about the dignity
of human life, even about the definition of human life itself. Cloning, foetus farming, patenting life
forms, designer babies engineered with specific traits, even the chimera of animal-hybrid combina-
tions used to harvest organs mark the horizon. If the abortion controversy hinged on when human
life begins, the genetic revolution thrusts forward such questions as ‘What is a human being? Who
decides? What about new creations?’ The genetic revolution also raises the further question of how
society will perceive (or welcome) the imperfect. Finally, modern technologies may widen the gap
between the poor and the affluent, who are most likely to engineer advantageous traits in their
offspring or, as is already occurring, to exploit the poor in organ trafficking.

Although Catholic theologians have begun focusing on these profound questions, it will take
a massive educational campaign for the church to provide a moral lead in the debates to come.
Again, its capacity to provide moral guidance in this revolutionary era will hinge in part on
whether the church remains a vigorous spiritual institution around the globe.

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The Catholic Church and Catholicism in global politics


