

Review - Vatican Diplomacy at the United Nations

Written by Jodok Troy

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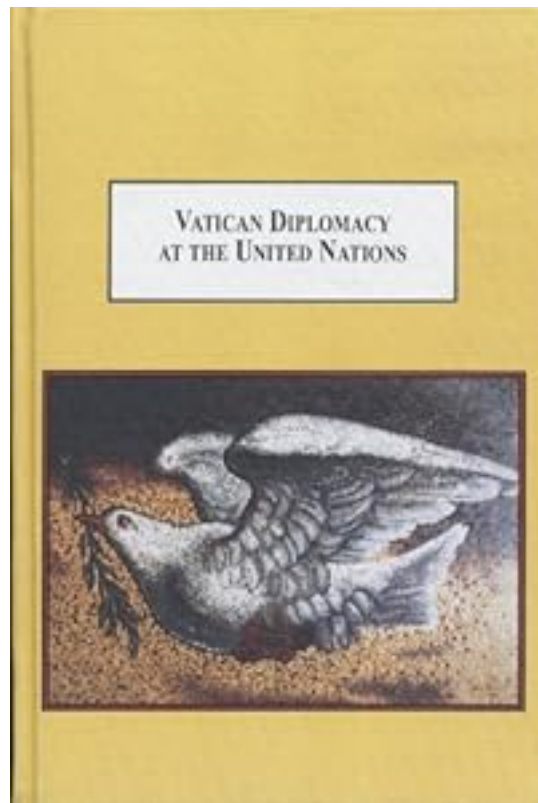
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JODOK TROY, DEC 5 2013

Vatican Diplomacy at the United Nations: A History of Catholic Global Engagement

By: Roman A. Melnyk

Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2009



In 2002, the Swiss Confederation (aka Switzerland) changed its status from a permanent observer to a full member of the United Nations (UN). 10 years later, in 2012, the long term observer entity to the UN, Palestine, was granted observer status as a state. Why is this important regarding the topic of “Vatican diplomacy at the United Nations”? First of all, one clarification: what the well-researched study by Roman Melnyk means when talking about the Vatican is not the Vatican (i.e. the city-state within Rome) but the subject of international law – the Holy See. Both entities, the Vatican and the Holy See (i.e. the institution of and around the pope as head of church and state) are subjects of international law, but only Vatican City is an actual physical entity in the classical, Westphalian sense. What is meant when referring to “the Vatican” however, in every-day as well as in academic conversation, is most often the Holy See. In practice, its administrative, political, and legal procedures are carried out by the Holy See.

Second, the mention of Switzerland and the State of Palestine as permanent observers to the UN are interesting since the Holy See – without any formal territory and as a de facto representation of a religious community – is

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another permanent observer of the UN. Melnyk demonstrates a deep knowledge of the issue which sometimes reads – for students of international relations – rather legalistic. Nevertheless, he traces the aspirations of the Holy See in the UN to its theological roots which want the Holy See to be a “voice in defence of the dignity of the human person.” (p. 3) Nothing other than that can be read in the second paragraph of the otherwise rather secular Preamble of the Charter of the UN on its purpose: “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small...” As such, the Holy See has participated in UN institutions from their very beginnings. For example, none other than Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who, as Pope John XXIII, would become famous for initiating the Second Vatican Council, served as the Holy See’s first permanent observer to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). However, it was not until 1964 that the Holy See was formally invited by then-Secretary General U Thant to send a permanent observer to the UN; and its formal range and level of participation has only been settled since 2004.

There are many answers as to why the Holy See acts so energetically within the framework of the UN. The most obvious reason therefore is also the most often over-looked: because *it can*. The Holy See maintains a larger diplomatic apparatus than many traditional state peers. What is more, the international engagement of the Holy See expanded parallel to the same engagements of popes, culminating in the most intense diplomatic activity so far by Pope John Paul II. What is interesting in all this engagement is, of course, that the Holy See’s delegate (i.e. diplomat) – the Nuncio – serves two juridical masters: Canon and international law, both of which the study in great detail descriptively addresses. The Nuncio is required to report on any matter that may affect the specific territory to which he is assigned. That the power to stick to both may cause intersections from time to time we can witness in the appointment of Nuncios (and bishops) in political systems hostile towards religion.

What the Holy See promotes and what Melnyk stresses as well is well known: “individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution.” (p. 160) Despite its legalistic and historical approach the book is not free of prescriptive elements, e.g., in criticising secular initiatives speaking out against the Holy See’s direct participation in the UN framework. What is particularly interesting in the book is Melnyk’s tracing of the development of the legates’ (diplomatic corps’) educational training. At this point it is also where he sees the most potential for future adaptations and improvement: in the opening of the diplomatic service (which is already, partly, possible in theory) to lay people. In sum, the book provides a comprehensive legal and historical context to the study of the Holy See and (not so much “in”) international relations. This is even more so since change within the Roman Catholic Church always tends to be rather slow and once settled issues are bound to remain in place for a long time. The participation of the Holy See in the UN is, however, ample evidence of a Church adapting itself to the realities of international politics rather fast and flexibly.

In sum, this is a book worthwhile for those interested in anything historical and juristically that relates to the topic of the Holy See within the framework of the United Nations, beginning at the origins of institutionalized Vatican diplomacy, its brief relations with the League of Nations, to its engagement in the foundation of the UN, and onward to the days of the former Pope Benedict XVI.

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