



## **Building Bridges: Religion, Diplomacy and the Pursuit of the Common Good**

By Ambassador Miguel H. Diaz

The hall at the Doge's Palace in Venice called Sala del Collegio contains several paintings that suggest the central role of religion in Venetian state affairs. Of particular interest is the fact that this was the hall where the Doge received governors, bishops, and ambassadors. The ceiling, which contains three central depictions, was commissioned in 1575 from Paolo Veronese, a great painter of the Italian Renaissance. A critical analysis of Veronese's paintings and the historical context that produced them lies beyond the purpose of my present reflections. Suffice to say that Veronese created the paintings in this diplomatic room following the peace that the Republic of Venice had concluded with the Turks in 1573 and in light of ongoing tensions experienced by the Republic with the papacy in Rome.

The mediating role of religion in Venetian contributions to the common good is the central motif of Veronese's paintings in this room. The first painting on the ceiling represents the state and alludes to the power of the Republic of Venice. Mars symbolizes power over the land and Neptune symbolizes power over the sea. Above them Veronese places two hovering angels and in between them he paints the figure of the lion, a religious symbol that represents the evangelist St. Mark.

Veronese devotes the second painting entirely to religion and faith. Representing religion is the figure of an Old Testament priest. Representing faith is a woman dressed in white who carries a chalice and sits suspended on a majestic white cloud. An inscription in Latin, which accompanies this image, warns the state against abandoning religion as its foundation: "Nunquam derelicta-Reipublicae fundamentum."

The third of these paintings on the ceiling contains two women: Justice carries a sword and scale, while Peace carries olive branches. They stand at the feet of Venice who holds a scepter and sits on an orb that resembles the world. Veronese depicts the winged lion in-between these figures, once again pointing to the role of religion in the state's efforts to achieve justice and peace. Other depictions surround these central paintings that suggest virtuous acts necessary for the common good. Of particular interest are paintings that highlight the eight virtues and those that recall various outstanding deeds of Ancient heroes.

Veronese's paintings at the Doge's Palace in Venice provide a fitting way to introduce the theme of my reflections today, Building Bridges: Religion, Diplomacy, and the Pursuit of the Common Good. Venice



has been characterized as the city of bridges. This characterization is appropriate not only because of the fact that numerous bridges connect Venice's one hundred islands, but also because this city has a rich history of bridge-building efforts within and outside of the Christian world. Indeed, the Venetian Republic cultivated a web of diplomatic relations that at one point extended far into the Eastern Roman Empire and included Christian interactions with Jewish and Muslim communities.

Diplomatic halls today may not contain the kind of explicit religious and mythological imagery found in places like the Doge's Palace in Venice. But there is no doubt that religious ideas and actors remain indispensable tools in the pursuit of peace and justice and the good that must be commonly constructed. As Secretary Clinton has said: "we need to build new partnerships across regions and religions—and that requires religious leaders, and NGOs, citizens to help build the good governance, and transparent institutions and basic services upon which true security depends." In what follows, I will explore briefly the subject of why diplomacy needs religion and why religion needs diplomacy in human efforts to pursue the common good.

#### *Why Diplomacy Needs Religion in the Pursuit of the Common Good*

It does not take much effort to realize what some observers have characterized as the globalization of God and religion's growing influence in international politics. In a recently published article that highlights this historical reality and its implications relative to foreign affairs, Scott M. Thomas argues that as "the world becomes more religious, religion will also likely alter relations in the traditional nation-state system." He concludes that "a new kind of world is in the making" and that understanding this world is essential for U.S. and international foreign policy makers in the coming decades. Thomas argues that the United States will increase its capacity to harness its "power to improve international security and better the lives of millions" if it recognizes and utilizes this worldwide religious resurgence. Thomas warns that failure to engage religion in constructive ways will lead to the negative consequences of increased violence and instability worldwide. By engaging religious communities, U.S. diplomats will expand our exercise of smart power, receiving from these communities important conceptual contributions and best practices that can address some of the challenges that confront our world.

Diplomacy can constructively engage religion by embracing right and reasonable speech with respect to the nature of the common good. Such speech is necessary as communities throughout the world seek ways to reconcile their increasing sense of diversity and interdependence. In many ways, our world faces

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a very ancient question related to human identity: How can the one and the many be reconciled? The common good offers a way to affirm unity within a social body, even while maintaining the need for particularity, diversity, and above all, interdependence.

Jacques Maritain, Catholic philosopher and former French ambassador to the Holy See (1945-48) argued that “the common good includes not only the collection of public commodities and services” but also “the sum or sociological integration of all the civic conscience, political virtues and sense of right and liberty...in the individual lives of its members.” Maritain’s writings remind us that “the common good is not only a system of advantages and utilities but also a rectitude of life, an end, good in itself or, as the Ancients expressed it, a bonum honestum.”

The common good cannot be built upon deception, neglect, manipulation, or the exploitation of any person or community. Representing neither an individualistic or collectivistic vision of society, the common good affirms oneness out of many, and the empowerment of and care for particular persons and communities, especially those most in need and lacking a voice in society. This concept of the common good provides a signpost that can guide diplomatic conversations as nations and international organizations ponder policies to meet the socio-cultural and political challenges of our times.

Diplomacy not only benefits from right speech about the nature of the common good but more specifically, from right actions that advance the common good. In the pursuit of right actions, the engagement of religious leaders is indispensable. The presence of religious agents and organizations, and their network of relationships are key to meet the challenges that confront us in an age marked by interdependence. Recognizing this “age of interconnection,” President Obama’s National Security Strategy affirms the need to pursue comprehensive engagement. The report underscores that “we must take advantage of the unparalleled connections that America’s government, private sector, and citizens have around the globe.” Thus, “we must engage nations, institutions, and peoples around the world on the basis of mutual interests and mutual respect.”

Engagement with religious leaders lies at the heart of the U.S. mission to the Holy See. The Catholic Church has a vast network of humanitarian, educational, and health care institutions. Moreover, few sovereign states offer the kind of religious connections the Holy See offers. Many visitors to our embassy in Rome are surprised when they hear that at present the Holy See is among the top five states in the

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world in the number of countries with which it has diplomatic relations. The Holy See has diplomatic relations with 178 states. In addition, it is a member or observer in every major international organization in the world.

Our mission has always taken advantage of this unparalleled religious connection and has cooperated with the Holy See on the basis of shared foreign policy interests. Since my arrival at post, our mission has hosted two international conferences. In the first of these conferences we partnered with Caritas Internationalis to promote the care of children with HIV/AIDS. In October of last year, we brought together an impressive group of leaders from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities to share success stories and strategies related to their common actions on economic development, conflict resolution, and environmental protection.

This coming May our mission to the Holy See will partner with St. Thomas University in Miami to host an international conference on creating private and public partnerships to prevent trafficking in persons. This TIP conference will build upon the work of my predecessors, and expand the network of religious agents engaged in this important mission. Conversations at our mission with numerous religious leaders and organizations have moved us beyond the sharing of right words into the sphere of right human actions. At the invitation of President Obama's Cairo speech our mission to the Holy See continues to "turn dialogue into Interfaith service, so bridges between peoples lead to action."

#### *Why Religion Needs Diplomacy in the Pursuit of the Common Good*

The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, opens with a breath of fresh air: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well" (GS, 1). This important document affirms that the Church has been called at all times to read the signs of the time and must be aware, understand, and speak to the upheavals and products of human thinking and creativity (GS 4). While noting the role of the Church as educator, *Gaudium et Spes* also understands the Church as a student of humanity proclaiming that "whatever truth, goodness, and justice is to be found in past or present human institutions is held in high esteem by the Council (GS, 42). The Council maintains that it is not enough for religious leaders to give to the world, but also for them to receive from the world. Thus the Council declares: "Just as it is in the world's interest to acknowledge the Church as a social reality and a driving force in history, so too the Church is not unaware how much it has profited from the history and development of mankind" (GS 44).



There is no doubt that this conciliar understanding can be extended, *mutatis mutandis*, to how religion can profit from the art of diplomacy. Religion needs diplomacy to stay in touch with the socio-political and cultural realities of the world. Religion does not exist in a vacuum. Religion is a social experience that binds people together within particular cultural contexts and ties them communally to God. With respect to its human dimension, diplomats can offer religious leaders critical insights into how different governments interpret the signs of the time. Cultivating this relationship can prevent religious institutions from falling into sectarianism while also improving their likelihood of success with respect to actions on behalf of the common good. Simply put: Jerusalem needs Athens to become a more persuasive voice and agent of change in the world. Religion needs diplomacy to avoid fundamentalism and extremism.

Religious leaders often speak in transcendental terms and proclaim absolute truths. Diplomats address ongoing worldly challenges and practice the art of compromise and negotiation. Recent events in various parts of the world have demonstrated the danger of the radicalization of religion. Without cultivating a diplomatic disposition toward openness and conversation, without a willingness to engage other points of view and discover truth and goodness in these points of view, religion runs the risk of becoming an instrument of violence. Religion can learn from diplomacy ‘how’ to engage human differences and pursue reasoned conversations for the sake of the common good.

### *Concluding Remarks*

Catholic tradition has long conjugated faith with reason, nature with grace, and the earthly city with the City of God (a position strongly supported by Pope Benedict XVI). This Chalcedonian grammar of distinguishing but not separating human life from God’s life offers a way of relating diplomacy and religion. This analogy can help if on the one hand, we understand diplomats as representatives of particular human experiences, cultures, and socio-political histories, and on the other hand, we take religious leaders as representatives of transcendental experiences that bind humans to God. The integration of diplomacy and religion distinguishes but does not separate their contributions to the common good.

One of the titles of the Holy Father is Pontifex Maximus, the greatest of bridge-builders. In antiquity, pontifices were persons who bridged the gap between the world of humans and the world of the gods. Given the increased importance of religion in society and its value as a tool to advance the common good, gaps must be bridged between highly secularized states and religious institutions, between the foreign



policies of nations that minimize engaging religion and those that maximize this engagement in fundamentalist terms, and between diplomatic activity and religious agency. If we succeed in bridging these gaps, our rapidly changing and restless world will wake up to a better tomorrow. In turn, new artists might be inspired to depict within our diplomatic halls, our virtuous and outstanding deeds that have advanced the common good. Above all, these halls will become places that witness anew justice and peace facing one another at the feet of our nations' rulers.

Thank you. May God bless The Catholic University of America. May God bless our diplomatic mission to the Holy See, and may God bless the United States of America.

*Delivered by Hon. Miguel H. Diaz, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See  
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