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"Far from an Alliance: The United States and the Holy See's Approach vis-à-vis Havana since the Cuban Revolution in Light of Pope Francis's Mediation,

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Introduction

The study of American diplomacy in the second half of the 20th century shows that the United States constantly tried to enlist the Vatican's help in stirring left-wing – and sometime right-wing – regimes toward democracy, convinced as it was that there was a *de facto* alignment of views between Washington and the Holy See¹. Many times however, much to the United States' dismay, it realized that they did not necessarily share the same priorities. Cuba after John Paul's II 1998 visit is such an example. The role of the Catholic Church as sole independent interlocutor of the regime that developed as a result of the papal trip led U.S. administrations to increasingly insist that the Vatican call for greater freedoms and bolster civil society, like it had done in Poland, eventually prompting regime change. These calls fell on deaf ears however in Rome, as the Catholic Church was pursuing its own priorities on the Caribbean island. This paper aims to explore these divergent viewpoints in the context of a later development: the mediating role played by Pope Francis between Raul Castro and Barack Obama, which eventually led to the rapprochement between the two countries announced in December 2014. This involvement on the part of Pope Francis, at the request in part of the United States, after decades of refusing a political intervention, does not, as we will try to demonstrate, signal a change in the Vatican's approach vis-à-vis Cuba. We will use mediation theory to show that Vatican action remains motivated largely by the factors which have guided its attitude toward Havana since the revolution, and even its whole approach to international action, and that if this mediation effort is proof of a change of a attitude, it is rather of one from the other two protagonists involved, especially Washington.²

¹ For more on this, see M. GAYTE, *The Vatican and the Reagan Administration: A Cold War Alliance?*, *Catholic Historical Review*, 97 (2011), n. 4, p. 713-736; see also M. GAYTE, *Les Etats-Unis et le Vatican : analyse d'un rapprochement (1981-1989)*, PhD dissertation, Université Paris III, 2010, <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-00834752/document>

² On US efforts to involve the Vatican in promoting a democratic transition in Cuba, see Marie GAYTE, *Cold War Triangle? The United States, the Vatican and Cuba*, « *Transatlantic Studies Journal* » 11 (2013), n. 1, p. 47-61; « La médiation du pape François entre La Havane et Washington : rupture ou continuité dans la diplomatie pontificale ? », *IdeAs*, n°10, automne 2017/hiver 2018, <https://journals.openedition.org/ideas/2191>.

A sustained dialogue which made the Catholic Church into the regime's sole private interlocutor

The Cuban revolution which began in 1959 had dire consequences for the Catholic Church on the island. In the three years following the success of the uprising, many priests and religious were either exiled or sent to labor camps. Seminaries were closed, Catholic schools were nationalised and the Constitution declared Cuba an atheist nation³. The consequences on religious practice on the island were devastating, all the more so as Catholicism had been the faith of the Spanish oppressor, and was therefore embraced rather reluctantly by its inhabitants, hence a chronic shortage of priests (most had been Spanish), low rates of church membership and religious practice, especially in the countryside.

Yet, despite the hostility displayed by the Castro regime, the Holy See never completely severed its ties with Havana. Contrary to Washington, which tried to isolate the island nation into surrender, the Vatican always maintained diplomatic relations⁴, albeit at a lower level, through the presence of a chargé d'affaires instead of that of an apostolic nuncio⁵. The decision to keep lines of communications open was sometimes regarded as a controversial aspect of Holy See diplomacy, but it was motivated by the will not to abandon Cuban Catholics to their fate. This attitude, reminiscent of Agostino Casaroli's *Ostpolitik* vis-à-vis Soviet bloc countries, enabled the Church to make some progress after the disastrous early years of the revolution: Cuban bishops were thus able to travel to Rome to attend Vatican II Council; several priests were allowed to settle on the island, staving off the Church's ineluctable extinction. In 1974, Casaroli himself was able to travel there, and he had the opportunity of meeting with Fidel Castro⁶. Castro often did not keep the promises it had made to the Vatican, yet the latter remained steadfast in its condemnation of the U.S. embargo. It was joined in this by Cuban bishops. After a period of silence, stunned as they

³ Aurelio ALONSO TEJADA, *Iglesia y política en Cuba revolucionaria*, Havana 2002, chapter 1; Aurelio ALONSO TEJADA, *El laberinto cubano tras la caída del muro*, Buenos Aires 2009, p. 290, Joseph HOLBROOK, *The Catholic Church in Cuba, 1959-1962: the Clash of Ideologies*, "International Journal of Cuban Studies", 2 (2010), n. 3-4, p. 264-275.

⁴ André DUPUY, *La diplomatie du Saint-Siège*, Paris 1980, p. 228.

⁵ Thomas QUIGLEY, *The Catholic Church and Cuba's International Ties*, "Religion, Culture and Society: The Case of Cuba", Woodrow Wilson Center Report on the Americas, edited by M. Crahan, 9 (2003), p. 95.

⁶ A. DUPUY, p. 229-230.

were by the blows dealt by the regime, they called for an end to the embargo starting in 1969 and for reconciliation between Cubans⁷.

It was in this context of sustained dialogue that, in 1985, alarmed at the low level of vocations on the island, the Holy See hinted at the possibility of John Paul II travelling to Cuba in 1986 or 1987. When Vatican officials informed their US counterparts of this possibility, Washington expressed its disapproval. Having “worked for so many years at isolating the island”, a papal trip to Cuba was “the last thing it wanted”⁸. The legitimacy boost such a trip would provide Fidel Castro with was not lost on the Reagan Administration. According to U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Thomas Melady, the prospect of a papal visit to Havana was once again discussed in 1989, and then again in 1992. On both occasions, the United States let the Vatican know that a trip would not be “opportune.” The Clinton administration appears to have been “greatly distressed” when the trip eventually occurred in 1998. John Paul II had initially decided to delay the visit in light of the fall of the Berlin Wall and its possible repercussions on Cuba, but since there was no regime change on the island, he saw no other choice but to go there to help revive the Catholic Church, all the more so as the so-called “Special Period” was also a time of religious renewal during which the Church was facing competition from other faiths.

The Pope’s 1998 Cuban pilgrimage confirmed to a certain extent Washington’s fears. Although he did call for more freedom, criticized the Marxist ideology underpinning the regime, and called on Cuba to “open to the world,” John Paul II appeared alongside Fidel Castro and stigmatized the U.S. embargo, denouncing “*oppressive economic measures — unjust and ethically unacceptable — imposed from outside the country.*”⁹ The visit gave added impetus to the policy of “constructive engagement” that had been started by the Vatican almost from the beginning of the revolution with chargé d’affaires Cesare Zacchi, which towards the end of the 1960s could also rely on the Cuban episcopate. Following the pope’s trip, the Holy See’s approach was to keep bolstering the Church’s presence on the island through a dialogue with Cuban authorities, which precluded engaging in any feud with

⁷ R.F. HURTADO and T. HENKEN, *Religion and Thought*, “Latin America in Focus: Cuba”, edited by T. HENKEN, M. CELAYA and D. CASTELLANOS, Santa Barbara 2013, p. 186, ALONSO, *El laberinto cubano*, p. 306.

⁸ Memo, Martin VAN HEUVEN to Rozanne RIDGWAY, “The Vatican and US Policy: Saturday Reading”; November 25, 1985, box 2, folder 25, William A. WILSON Papers, Special Collections, Georgetown University Library.

⁹ John Paul II, Address, Farewell Ceremony, January 25, 1998, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1998/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19980125_lahavana-departure.html

them. It showed itself quite reserved toward dissidents' initiatives, especially when they were Catholic; as a Vatican diplomat explained his American counterpart, Rome did not want the Church to be perceived as being part of the opposition. He also blamed the lack of progress in terms of Church freedom on the actions of dissidents who vaunted their Catholic faith¹⁰. Church officials did address human rights violations and the fate of political prisoners, but only in private¹¹. This attitude proved rewarding for Catholicism on the island¹² It experienced a boost in religious vocations, a seminary being even inaugurated in 2010 in a ceremony attended by Raul Castro¹³. This approach not only yielded concrete results for the Church's pastoral mission: the Church also stepped into the gap left by Cuba's failing economy by providing social services and it became, as noted by U.S. diplomats, the only major institution in Cuba independent from the Cuban government in a country where the opposition is weak and fragmented¹⁴.

Washington begins to see the Vatican as potential agent for political change in Havana, to no avail

After voicing its reservations about the Church's dialogue with the Castro regime, the United States began thinking of the religious entity as a possible catalyst for political change in Cuba. Could the Vatican foster the emergence of a civil society, whose presence would then hasten a democratic transition? Starting in the early 2000s, with the George W. Bush administration, U.S. diplomacy exerted constant pressure on Church authorities, both in Rome and Cuba, to ask them to push for political change. Nearly every contact between Vatican and U.S. officials in the Bush years was used by Washington to pressure the Vatican to conduct some form or other of public intervention on behalf of democratic change. Requests were

¹⁰ Wikileaks, diplomatic cables sent by the US Embassy to the Holy See to the State Department, *Holy See: DAS Madison Meeting with Deputy FM on Cuba, Nicaragua*, October 24, 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06VATICAN225_a.html; *Holy See Cautious on Cuban Dissidents*, November 8, 2002, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/02VATICAN5471_a.html; *Papa Visits Pope; FM Tauran May Reciprocate*, January 16, 2003, *Holy See's Passive Approach to GOC Dissent Crackdown*, April 2 2003, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03VATICAN1406_a.htmlhttps://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03VATICAN195_a.html.

¹¹ V. GAETAN, *How the Catholic Church is Preparing for a Post-Castro Cuba*, "Foreign Affairs", February 27 2012, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/americas/2012-02-27/how-catholic-church-preparing-post-castro-cuba>.

¹² A. ALONSO, *El laberinto cubano*, p. 295.

¹³ J. ORTEGA, *La visita di un papa conciliatore e i suoi frutti*, « 30 giorni », April 3, 2012, http://www.30giorni.it/articoli_id_78335_11.htm.

¹⁴ Wikileaks, *Holy See: Scen setter for the President's July 10 Visit*, June 26, 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09VATICAN78_a.html, D. CONTRERAS-GARCIA, *Iglesia catolica y estado en la republica de Cuba : pasado y presente de sus relaciones*, "America Latina Hoy", 63 (2013), p. 177, A. ALONSO TEJADA, *El laberinto cubano*, p. 295.

made for the Vatican to push for the liberation of dissidents at every opportunity, as well as for public statements calling on the regime to restore basic liberties and accept free elections. U.S. officials believed that the liberation of dissidents would foster the emergence of a strong civil society conducive to political change. Generally, State Department officials urged US diplomats working at the U.S. Embassy to get the Holy See to adopt a harder line on Cuba, but also on Venezuela. The intensity of these requests increased after Raul Castro took over from his brother Fidel in 2006, as U.S. diplomats thought that this change could constitute the opportunity for an even more radical one¹⁵.

All these requests for public Vatican interventions were left unanswered however, leading to a sense of disillusionment on the part of U.S. diplomats, which was reflected in the titles of cables sent by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See to the State Department (“Holy See Cautious on Cuban Dissidents,” “Holy See’s Passive Approach to GOC”...) ¹⁶. It was also reflected in the words of the political attaché to the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See: in 2002, he deplored to his Vatican interlocutor that the Vatican was not playing as active a role in fostering democratic change in Cuba as it had in Poland in the 1980s.¹⁷ The Vatican’s consistent response to these requests, as reported in U.S. diplomatic cables, was that while it did want Cuba to transition to democracy and supported “philosophically” greater political freedom in Cuba, “it [was] not at the forefront of the battle,” as it was “more concerned about protecting its small space for operation in Cuba”¹⁸. It was therefore in a “fundamentally defensive posture,” with an “overriding concern:” to maintain the ability of the faithful to practice their faith and to avoid crackdown on its own limited freedom by antagonizing the regime¹⁹. The Vatican believed that change would be slow. While it believed transition to be “inevitable,” it could be “many years away,” even “years after Fidel Castro leaves the scene.” Therefore, it “takes the long view”: it “wait[s] for political conditions to improve before pressing hard for greater freedoms while patiently seeking to maintain and expand space for

¹⁵ Wikileaks, *Holy See Views on Cuban Transition*, August 10, 2006, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06VATICAN168_a.html, *Scenesetter for Codel Smith*, October 12, 2006; DAS Madison Engages Vatican on Cuba, *op. cit.*; « Holy See’s Passive Approach to GOC Dissent Crackdown », April 2, 2003, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/03VATICAN1406_a.html.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, *Holy See Cautious; Holy See’s Passive Approach*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, *Holy See Cautious*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, *Holy See: Scenesetter for the President’s July 10 Visit*, June 26, 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09VATICAN78_a.html.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, *Holy See’s Passive Approach*.

religious activities”²⁰, at the same time working behind the scenes with the regime on the situation of individual dissidents.

Not only did the Vatican anticipate a long transition in Cuba, but it also seemed to *want* this transition to take place over an extended period of time. This was motivated by its fear that overnight change, especially in light of recent economic difficulties, might lead to bloodshed. Therefore, Rome purported to encourage gradual change and reconciliation and to favor a process similar to the transition in Spain after the death of Francisco Franco. Also, then deputy secretary for relation with the states Pietro Parolin confessed that events in Eastern Europe in the 1990s suggested to the Church that “increased political freedom does not necessarily lead to increased piety or church participation”, and that “[a]s the pope had said, everything depends on how you use your freedom”²¹. As a matter of fact, Pope John Paul II was bitterly disillusioned about the effects of freedom on Poland, which embraced unrestrainedly Western materialistic values. One can only imagine the impact of a rapid transition on a little religious Cuba: while Poland had a population that was 90% Catholic at the time of its democratic transition, with Catholicism having been a key rallying point for its struggle against communist rule, Cuba has only 60% of nominal Catholics, the level of Catholic practice estimated to be around 1.5-2%, and the Church was long seen as foreign and siding with oppressive forces. Parolin voiced his doubts that the Cubans, given their lack of religious education after decades of communist rules, would be “morally prepared for the challenge facing them.” The new era of freedom, he said, was “also a challenge to the Church”²². The Holy See, unlike the United States, needs time to make sure more Cubans will remain faithful to the Church once the Castros’ rule comes to an end. In the meantime, and as evidenced by the current concerns of the Cuban episcopate, they are working hard to try to get the means to boost religious practice: to that effect they focus their effort on access to the media, the return of religious education on the island (which has been banned since 1961) and the building of houses of worship.

Early in George W. Bush first term, in a cable drafted ahead of Bush’s first audience with John Paul II, “Embassy Vatican” insisted on the fact that regardless of the Vatican’s special nature as both a state and the headquarters of a global church, the United States should

²⁰ *Ibidem, Holy See Cautious.*

²¹ *Ibidem, Holy See: DAS Madison Meeting.*

²² *Ibidem, Holy See: DAS Madison Meeting.*

think of it as similar to traditional nations, with a variety of factors informing its foreign policy. In addition to seeking to defend religious principles and engage in humanitarian pursuits, one motivation was its “national “self-interest””, that is to say its attempts to protect Catholics around the world, and to protect and expand its pastoral role²³. This attitude was on full display at the time of Pope Benedict’s March 2012 trip to Cuba: his concern about progress for religious freedom featured nearly above all other considerations and led to his trip having a mostly pastoral tone. At the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre’s shrine, he committed to Mary’s care “those who are deprived of freedom, those who are separated from their loved ones,” but overall the pope’s message about civil rights was very cautious and far from confrontational (he also criticized the U.S. embargo in his farewell speech, denouncing “restrictive economic measures, imposed from outside the country, [that] unfairly unburden its people”), since the aim of this trip was first and foremost to protect and expand the church’s sphere of operations. During his homily on Plaza de la Revolucion in Havana, he even acknowledged “with joy” that “in Cuba, steps have been taken to enable the Church to carry out her essential mission of expressing her faith openly and publicly”²⁴. He dealt with dissidents on a private basis, and did not meet with any of them.

While the United States was trying to get the Vatican to harden its stance vis-à-vis the Castros and side with dissidents, the Vatican was calling on U.S. officials to talk to the Cuba regime. Ever since John Paul’s II 1998 visit, the Vatican had been challenging Washington to “engage” with the Cuban government, instead of isolating it with an ineffective embargo, which they considered an “anachronism”²⁵. Raul Castro’s appointment as interim leader in 2006 sparked Vatican hopes of further progress. In 2008, Vatican Secretary of State Tarcisio Bertone, freshly returned from a trip to Cuba, told U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Mary Ann Glendon that “Raul [is] a practical man open to practical steps”²⁶ and his deputy Angelo Accattino said this was a “time for dialogue” and that he hoped the United States would steer clear of “strongly worded statements”²⁷.

²³ Wikileaks, *The Vatican—The Supranational Power*, July 3, 2001, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/01VATICAN3507_a.html

²⁴ Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Plaza de la Revolucion Jose Marti, Havana, March 28, 2012, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20120328_la-habana.html

²⁵ Wikileaks, *Caritas International on Cuba – « Cautious Optimism, »*, March 14, 2001, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/01VATICAN1436_a.html

²⁶ *Ibidem*, “Holy See Secretary of State Talks about Cuba,” March 7, 2008, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08VATICAN31_a.html

²⁷ *Ibidem*, “Vatican Secretary of State to Visit Cuba,” October 17, 2007, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07VATICAN150_a.html

A very short history of Pope Francis's mediating efforts between Cuba and the United States in 2014

In this context of decade-long tension between the two nations, news in December 2014 that Cuba and the United States would restore diplomatic relations came as a great surprise, all the more so as the talks had been top secret. Revelations that Pope Francis had mediated between the two parties came as further surprise. The story of this mediation has been told elsewhere²⁸. The Vatican was called upon to break the impasse in the secret high level talks between Havana and Washington that had begun in June 2013 to secure, on the U.S. side the release of USAID contractor Alan Gross, and on the Cuban side that of the three *Cuban Five* still detained in the United States. Several U.S. members of Congress, who were not aware of the existence of secret talks, conveyed to Pope Francis their desire to see him involved in getting the two countries to talk. This led to Pope Francis bringing up the issue during his audience with President Obama in March 2014²⁹. The pope and the president spoke at length about Cuba³⁰. When the pope told the president it was high time to change U.S. policy toward the island nation, the president informed him about the ongoing talks, and suggested to Francis that it would be useful for him to play a part in this dialogue³¹ to help unblock the situation³². Pope Francis decided therefore to do what he could to help the talks move forward. He entrusted Cardinal-Archbishop of Havana Jaime Ortega y Alamino with the task of representing him with the two parties to the negotiations³³. Pope Francis then wrote in August to both Castro and Obama³⁴, expressing his support for the dialogue and urging the two leaders to solve “humanitarian questions of common interest, including the situation of certain prisoners, in order to start a new phase in their relation”. He also offered the Vatican's services³⁵. In addition, the pontiff instructed the Cuban cardinal to suggest to Raul Castro that he free Alan Gross as a gesture of goodwill, which would lead the U.S. to

²⁸ M. GAYTE, *La médiation du pape François entre La Havane et Washington : rupture ou continuité dans la diplomatie pontificale ?*, « Ideas », 2017, n. 10.

²⁹ P. KORNBLUH and W. LEOGRANDE, *Back Channel to Cuba: The Hidden History of Negotiations between Washington and Havana*, Chapel Hill 2015.

³⁰ P. VALLELY, *Pope Francis, The Struggle for the Soul of Catholicism*, New York 2015, p. 392.

³¹ P. KORNBLUH and W. LEOGRANDE, *Fidel Castro has died. Here's an inside look at Cuba's crazy backchannel negotiations with Obama*, “Mother Jones”, September-October 2015, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/08/secret-negotiations-gross-hernandez-kerry-pope-obama-castro-cuba/>.

³² J. ORTEGA, *Encuentro, Diálogo y Acuerdo*, El papa Francisco, Cuba y Estados Unidos, Madrid 2017, p. 109

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 98.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 115.

³⁵ P. KORNBLUH and W. LEOGRANDE, *Back Channel to Cuba*, p. 444-445.

reciprocate³⁶. Cuban and American negotiators availed themselves of this offer by choosing the Vatican as the place to seal the final agreement, on October 28, under the watchful eyes, among others, of Secretary of State Pietro Parolin and Cardinal Ortega³⁷, a decision which was made to instil trust between the two parties and make the Vatican into a *de facto* guarantor of each country's compliance with the terms of the deal³⁸.

A mediation that is more about continuity in Vatican behavior ...

When news came that Pope Francis had served as mediator to facilitate the rapprochement between Cuba and the U.S. announced in December 2014, one could at first think that this was a break in papal diplomacy, that the Vatican had finally acceded to American requests. The success of this mediation was attributed – and for good reason – to the fact that Francis was the first pope of the Americas. It was also credited to his keen interest in diplomacy³⁹, unlike his immediate predecessor, and in the situation in Cuba. While Jorge Mario Bergoglio could not accompany the papal delegation to Cuba in 1998 as initially planned, as he was faced with the imminent death of Buenos Aires's archbishop, who he was called upon to succeed, he wrote a book entitled *Dialogues between John Paul II and Fidel Castro*, in which he lambasted the U.S. embargo for its devastating consequences on the island, but also the socialist system. He first met Jaime Ortega in 1981, with whom he has had a close relationship ever since⁴⁰. His interest in Latin America overall was confirmed by his appointments or confirmation to the Secretariate of state of top level diplomats who had been posted in the region or had overseen it from Rome, such as Pietro Parolin, who was appointed Secretary of State, after serving as the pope's ambassador to Venezuela. Giovanni Becciu, who had served as nuncio to Havana from 2009 to 2011, was confirmed as Substitute for

³⁶ J. ORTEGA, 'YO ERA LA CARTA'. El cardenal cubano Jaime Ortega revela el rol que desempeñó en la caída del "muro del Caribe", el histórico acercamiento entre Estados Unidos y Cuba, "Tierras de America", February 4, 2017, <http://www.tierrasdeamerica.com/2017/02/04/yo-era-la-carta-el-cardenal-cubano-jaime-ortega-revela-el-rol-que-desempeno-en-la-caida-del-muro-del-caribe-el-historico-acercamiento-entre-estados-unidos-y-cuba/>.

³⁷ P. KORNBLUH and W. LEOGRANDE, , *Back Channel to Cuba*, p. 445-446.

³⁸ P. KORNBLUH and W. LEOGRANDE, *Fidel Castro has died; Papa, TV2000mons. Becciu: "Cuba e Usa hanno firmato disgelo davanti al Segretario di Stato Vaticano"*, "TV2000", September 18, 2015, <http://www.tv2000.it/blog/2015/09/18/papa-mons-becciu-cuba-e-usa-hanno-firmato-disgelo-davanti-al-segretario-di-stato-vaticano/>; A. Hirayama, *Cardinal tells inside story of landmark U.S.-Cuba deal*, "Asahi", May 10, 2017, <http://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/AJ201705100014.html>.

³⁹ D. GIBSON, *How Pope Francis's Diplomacy May Change Everything, Not Just US-Cuba Relations*, "Religion News Services", December 18, 2014, <http://religionnews.com/2014/12/18/pope-francis-diplomacy-may-change-everything-not-just-us-cuba-relations/>.

⁴⁰ C. COLONNA-CESARI, *Dans les secrets de la diplomatie vaticane*, Paris 2016.

General Affairs, while Antoine Camilleri, who had served as apostolic nuncio to Cuba in 2005-2006, was confirmed as undersecretary for relation with the States⁴¹.

This mediation however seems to signal greater continuity with his predecessors than change on the part of Pope Francis in its dealings with Cuba. Mediation theory and the study of previous mediating efforts on the part of the Holy See offer some interesting insights to help us understand the Vatican's rationale for accepting such a delicate role. Indeed, it is essential to understand the mediator's motivations. Those that led Pope Francis to accept this mediating role are not new as far as Vatican diplomacy and priorities are concerned. The promotion of peace between nations has long been a key goal of Vatican international action. While it had been involved in peacemaking efforts before, the papacy of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) marked the beginnings of unprecedented involvements to avert conflicts between nations, with his being called upon to help devise a solution to the conflict between Germany and Spain over the Caroline Islands. 1960s documents *Gaudium et Spes* and *Pacem in Terris* only strengthened this commitment⁴². Furthermore, the Vatican has a long history of mediations and good offices in the region⁴³, and these have not been limited to Catholic-majority nations⁴⁴. This is a direct consequence of the Church's strong influence in the region; it is also a corollary of Washington's claiming a continent-wide sphere of influence, which made difficult any arbitration by a European power, and made a Vatican intervention all the easier as the papal nuncio or apostolic delegate already present in the country could naturally serve as mediator⁴⁵. As a matter of fact, the United States itself is familiar with Vatican mediation: the times are long gone when anti-Catholicism and suspicion of a Spanish bias made it reject quite strongly Pope Leo's XIII proposed intervention to stop it from going to war with Spain over Cuba. Already in October 1962, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, Pope John XXIII, after securing the approval of both nations, had urged both the U.S. and the USSR to reduce tensions over Cuba⁴⁶. In 1978; it was the United States itself which enjoined Chile and Argentina to consider papal mediation over their dispute over sovereignty of the

⁴¹ P. PULLELLA, *Pope's Latin America Brains Trust Was behind Cuba Deal*, "Reuters", December 19, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-cuba-mediation-idUSKBN0JX1VG20141219>

⁴² G. BARBERINI, p. 90; 102; 109.

⁴³ I. CARDINALE, *Le Saint-Siège et la diplomatie : aperçu historique, juridique et pratique de la diplomatie pontificale*, Paris 1962, p. 46. J.B. NOE, *Géopolitique du Vatican*, Paris 2015, p. 34-35.

⁴⁴ G. BARBERINI, p. 178.

⁴⁵ J.M. TICCHI, *Bons offices, médiations, arbitrages dans l'activité diplomatique du Saint-Siège de Léon XIII à Benoît XV*, « Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée », 102 (1993), n. 2, p. 582.

⁴⁶ E. DI NOLFO, *L'Italie et la crise de Cuba en 1962*, « L'Europe et la crise de Cuba », edited by Maurice Vaisse, Paris 1993, p. 109-122.

Beagle Channel area, due to its lack of influence over either of the protagonists of the crisis (President Carter's emphasis on human rights as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy and its resulting antagonism with the military regimes at the helm of both Argentina and Chile made a mediating role for the United States impossible⁴⁷).

Another motivating factor in guiding the Holy See towards this mediating role has to do with Pope Francis's firm belief in creating a "culture of encounter," which means hosting meetings of leaders from different political and religious groups to encourage trust, friendship, and the common good⁴⁸. As he told the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See in January 2014, in the first year of his papacy, "[ev]erywhere, the way to resolve open questions must be that of diplomacy and dialogue"⁴⁹. This belief was further evidenced by his invitation to Mahmoud Abbas and Shimon Peres to come together to the Vatican in June 2014. That President Obama asked Pope Francis to help break the deadlocked talks with Cuba was more likely to be welcomed favorably by the pontiff than a request to try to help overthrow the Cuban regime. Cardinal Ortega, who played a key role in the mediating process, confirmed the continuity in the approaches of Pope Francis and his predecessors with regards to Cuba in the book he published on his and Francis's role in the U.S./Cuba rapprochement. On the morning of his election as pontiff, Francis was asked by Ortega about the growing tensions between the Church and certain Latin-American governments. Francis replied that "faced with these new economic and social projects and the changes they bring, the Church cannot remain a mere spectator; it cannot however deal with the situation from the outside through excessive criticism." These processes, he argued, must be "accompanied from the inside through dialogue"⁵⁰. This struck Ortega as a sign of continuity between popes, as he recounts that Pope Benedict had told him in June 2012 that "dialogue is the only path ; the Church is not in the world to change governments, but to penetrate the hearts of men with the

⁴⁷ M.C. MIRROW, *International Law and Religion in Latin America: The Beagle Channel Dispute*, "Suffolk Transnational Law Review", 28 (2004), n. 1, p. 10, https://ecollections.law.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1116&context=faculty_publications. See also Thomas PRINCEN, *International Mediation – The View from the Vatican: Lessons from Mediating the Beagle Channel Dispute*, *Negotiation Journal*, 3 (1987), p. 347-366; Andres VILLAR GERTNER, *Autonomy and Negotiation in Foreign Policy: The Beagle Channel Crisis*, London 2016; Lisa LINDSLEY, *The Beagle Channel Settlement: Vatican Mediation Resolves a Century-Old Dispute*, 29 (1987), n. 3, p. 435-454.

⁴⁸ V. GAETAN.

⁴⁹ Address of His Holiness Pope Francisco to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See; January 13, 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/january/documents/papa-francesco_20140113_corpo-diplomatico.html

⁵⁰ J. ORTEGA, *Encuentro*, p. 48-49.

Gospel”⁵¹. This led Cardinal Ortega to conclude that Pope Francis, “far from being an exotic flower in a conventional garden, is the loyal heir of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, themselves the heirs of the Second Vatican Council”.⁵²

Another motivating factor in accepting to take on this role has to do with restoring the prestige of the Holy See on the international stage. Francis became pope in March 2013 after Benedict XVI, whose eight-year papacy had an inward focus, with as corollary a retreat from global affairs. From Israel to Syria and Russia, Francis on the other hand made it very clear from the start of his papacy that he wanted to reclaim the Vatican’s lost spot in global affairs⁵³. One may compare this situation to John Paul II’s decision to mediate the Chile-Argentina dispute in December 1978, only two months into his pontificate, which can be interpreted as a way to increase the international stature of the Vatican and of the new pope⁵⁴. Likewise, Leo XIII’s multiple mediation efforts are to be seen in two contexts: that of his predecessor Pius IX’s inward focus⁵⁵ and that of the loss by the Vatican of all territory, as enshrined in the 1871 Law of Guarantees, and its consequent loss of sovereignty. Being asked to mediate by two major powers could serve as proof that the Vatican still played an important role on the world stage, which could go a long way toward helping it assert its continued sovereignty.

Finally, as noted by canon law professor Giovanni Barberini, “the Holy See operates like a subject who intends to promote its own interests, on top of the common interests of the international community”. “The Holy See”, he argues, “acts first and foremost in the interest of the universal Church, which goes through that of local churches and the interest of local Catholic institutions” “These interests,” he goes on, “include of course the freedom and autonomy of church institutions, the rights and freedoms of the laity, as well as the conditions for the development and growth of the Catholic faith in general”⁵⁶. These interests are indeed one of the reasons Pope John Paul II traveled to Cuba in 1998, after forty years of communism added to a history of an institutionally weak church⁵⁷, had resulted in a disastrous situation for the local church, with religious practice and vocations at an all-time low.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 53-54.

⁵³ D. GIBSON.

⁵⁴ M.C. MIRROW, p. 27.

⁵⁵ J.M. TICCHI, p. 572.

⁵⁶ G. BARBERINI, p. 88.

⁵⁷ A. ALONSO, *El laberinto cubano*, p. 289; P. LETRILLART, *L’Eglise catholique et la ‘société civile’ à Cuba*, « Les études du CERI », 2005, n. 113, p. 11-12.

Francis's mediation efforts are also to be seen partly in this context of enabling the church to play an ever-larger role in Cuban society. Reconciliation between Cuba and the United States, it was hoped, would reduce even further the need for the regime to restrict religious freedom, as many denominations had largely been seen as proxies of the West. This interpretation seems to be borne out by Pope Francis's attitude during his 2015 trip to the island, in which he adopted a very similar stance to those of John Paul and Benedict. His aim was not to contribute to regime change on the island. Cuba was not to be another Poland, but the role of the Catholic Church in Cuba was to help. Just before the trip, Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami, a diocese with a large Cuban-American population, said that in Cuba the Catholic Church was hoping for a "soft landing", because the alternative would be chaos, which is what Vatican diplomats in the John Paul and Benedict years had already told U.S. diplomats.⁵⁸ While in Cuba, Francis did not meet with any dissident and formulated only moderate critiques of human rights violations, while renewing the Vatican's call for an end to the U.S. embargo.

The continuity with past Vatican initiatives vis-à-vis Cuba, and with Vatican mediations and interventions on the global stage in general (peace promotion, dialogue, defense of the local Church's interests) is also evidenced by the choice of Cardinal Jaime Ortega as top mediator. The archbishop of Havana had been made in 1994 the first cardinal since the revolution, partly to revive a dying church and partly for the Vatican to have a point person to talk with the regime on the island⁵⁹. He soon became a key regime interlocutor, which allowed him to negotiate the release of political prisoners in 2010-2011. His resignation upon turning 75 was then turned down by Pope Benedict in 2011, proof of his important role in the eyes of the Holy See. In his dealing with the United States, Cardinal Ortega, who is seen by many Cuban-Americans and Cuban exiles as much too close to the Castros, if not as a downright traitor (they lambasted him for celebrating a mass in Havana cathedral in 2008 for Fidel Castro's health), has insisted repeatedly on the need for a dialogue without preconditions, as preconditions were unacceptable to Raul Castro⁶⁰. The lead negotiator, like the popes, is therefore known for not wanting to upend the political status quo

⁵⁸ I. SAN MARTIN, *Pope Francis's impact on Cuba and its church is already being felt*, "Crux", September 15, 2015, <https://cruxnow.com/church/2015/09/15/pope-francis-impact-on-cuba-and-its-church-is-already-being-felt/>

⁵⁹ A. ALONSO, *El laberinto cubano*, p. 297.

⁶⁰ M. PINSKY, *Could Catholic leader usher in a new Cuba?*, "USA Today", July 18, 2011, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/2011-07-18-castro-cuba-cardinal-ortega_n.htm.

given the risks this would entail for the Church and potentially for the population if regime change were to occur with violence.

Likewise, Pope John Paul II's mediation between Argentina and Chile was motivated in part by internal church matters. Latin American Catholics represented 40% of Catholics worldwide. In this context, a war between two Catholic countries would not only send a negative message, it also carried the risk of spreading to the whole – highly Catholic – region through a system of alliances. In addition, the conference of Latin American bishops (CELAM) scheduled for January and February 1979 in Puebla, Mexico, would have been greatly undermined by a war in the region. Finally, some have argued that offering the Vatican's services for peace was a way to somehow atone for its support of the military, authoritarian regimes of Chile and Argentina, with a view to preserving the standing of the Church once these regimes were replaced by democratic ones⁶¹.

... than change in the other protagonists' behavior

The Vatican's decision to help Cuba and the United States find a settlement and establish a sustained and official relationship stems therefore not so much from changes in its approach as from major shifts in Cuba and the United States' stances vis-à-vis one another. Mediation theory literature has highlighted the importance of a "hurting stalemate" or a "ripe moment" in moving conflict protagonists toward seeking good offices⁶². Indeed, Barack Obama's inauguration in 2009 marked a change in the U.S.'s stance vis-a-vis Cuba. As early as the presidential campaign, the Democratic candidate had called for a new approach and had called the policy pursued by Washington for the previous fifty years a failure. Instead of trying to isolate the regime while trying to boost civil society, Obama announced at the April 2009 Summit of the Americas that he wanted a new beginning with Cuba and that he was willing to discuss a number of concrete issues, such as the economy, migration or human rights. In that spirit, he relaxed a number of sanctions on the island-nation, for instance by lifting restrictions on the sending of remittances or on family travel⁶³. One has to add that the

⁶¹ M.C. MIRROW, p. 27.

⁶² W. ZARTMAN, *The Timing of Peace Initiatives: Hurting Stalemates and Ripe Moments*, "The Global Review of Ethnopolitics", 1 (2001), n. 1, p. 8-18.

⁶³ D. ALEXANDER and A.I. MARTINEZ, *Obama Wins Praise at Summit but Feels Heat on Cuba*, "Reuters", April 18, 2009, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-summit-americas/obama-wins-praise-at-summit-but-feels-heat-on-cuba-idUSTRE53F58G20090418>; S. GAY STOLBERG and A. BARRIONUEVO, *Obama Says US Will Pursue Thaw*

decision came not solely out of Obama's wish for reconciliation, but also because the United States was facing growing pressure from other member countries to readmit Cuba as a member of the Organization of American States (from which it had been expelled in 1962 at the behest of the United States) without preconditions⁶⁴, and more generally to put an end to the island's ostracism. The alternative for some OAS members would be to boycott the organization, something which would have been extremely detrimental to the United States' relation with countries of the region. This apparent goodwill however soon collided with reality: the arrest in December 2009 in Cuba of a USAID contractor, Alan Gross, accused of spying, which led to a standstill in the rapprochement, the United States placing Cuba on a list of countries whose citizens were to be submitted to additional controls at U.S. airports. After he was reelected in 2012, Barack Obama nonetheless decided to resume his efforts at rapprochement. The decision was likely motivated by his will to burnish his foreign policy legacy, which did not bode too well as his efforts at a reset with China and Russia were clearly failing.

Cuba's Raul Castro was also faced with a "ripe moment" of its own. The change came from the deteriorating situation in Venezuela, which, under the leadership of Hugo Chavez, had replaced the Soviet Union as the island's benefactor. Under an agreement signed in 2000, Venezuela sent a significant amount of oil to Cuba at highly discounted prices, in exchange for the sending of thousands of doctors and teachers to Venezuela, and for the possibility for Venezuelans of receiving free treatment on the island. However, when oil prices started to drop, the manna from Caracas started to become less abundant and put Cuba in a delicate economic situation. In addition, the economic reforms launched by Raul Castro were not yielding the expected benefits for the country's GDP. It was therefore hoped that an opening with the United States could lead to the coming of more U.S. tourists bringing much needed dollars to the island.⁶⁵

These pragmatic reasons led the two leaders to embrace a value that had been at the core of Vatican involvement on the international scene: dialogue. In this context, the pope was pleased to hear that on the American side of the equation, things had changed: after trying

with Cuba, "New York Times", April 17, 2009,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/18/world/americas/18prexy.html>

⁶⁴ H. MORALES and C.A. M', *The OAS: Should It Readmit Cuba*, "America Quarterly", fall 2009,
<https://www.americasquarterly.org/OAS-cuba-readmit>.

⁶⁵ *Why the United States and Cuba are Cosying Up*, "The Economist", May 29, 2015,
<https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2015/05/economist-explains-37>.

to cause regime change by all means possible, here was finally an administration which did not— at least not in the immediate future – seek regime change, but which was keen on engagement and dialogue. Beyond the pragmatic motivations that made Obama open to such an approach, it is worth reminding that the early years of his presidency were marked by his determination to engage with countries with which the United States had been at odds, whether it be Iran, Russia or China.⁶⁶ The word *engagement*, almost a leitmotiv at the time, strongly echoes the phrase *culture of encounter*, which has been a leitmotiv of Francis’s pontificate, with his insistence that even in the worst situations, dialogue is the only solution, as he pointed out to Middle Eastern Christians in his 2014 letter.⁶⁷ But while Pope Francis may have heightened the Vatican’s emphasis on the culture of dialogue and encounter, this culture has been central to the Church’s approach to the Cuban regime since the revolution, as mentioned above. Raul Castro also declared himself ready to dialogue, provided it would be “on an equal footing and with absolute respect for Cuban sovereignty and its right to self-determination”⁶⁸.

Conclusion

The Vatican’s approach vis-à-vis Cuba and its tense relation with the United States has not changed since the revolution of 1959. It is based on maintaining the lines of communication open, no matter how delicate the situation was at times for the Catholic Church on the island, so as to preserve as best as possible a space for religious operations there. It is also based on acceptance of the political status quo on the island (with some low-key interventions to ease the plight of individual dissidents) stemming from the belief that sudden regime change may have dire consequences not only for the Cuban people, but also for the Catholic Church, whose religious presence remains to this day fairly limited due to its historical factors. Pope Francis’s decision to accept calls for a mediating role reflects not so much change in the Vatican’s approach vis-à-vis Cuba; to the contrary, it is fully grounded in the Vatican’s traditional foreign policy since the days of Leo XIII: promotion of peace and

⁶⁶ L.H. HAMILTON, *Obama Foreign Policy: Significant Success and Notable Missteps*, “Huffington Post”, December 3, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/obama-foreign-policy-sign_b_13376732

⁶⁷ J. ALLEN, Pope Francis and the Culture of Encounter, *National Catholic Reporter*, December 20, 2013, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/francis-and-culture-encounter>, Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to Christians in the Middle East, December 21, 2014, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20141221_lettera-cristiani-medio-oriente.html

⁶⁸ W. LeOGRANDE, *Making Up is Hard to Do: Obama’s “New Approach” to Cuba*, “Nacla Report on the Americas”, 44 (2011), n. 44, p. 38.

dialogue between conflicting nations; defense of local churches' interests; desire to put the Vatican front and center on the political scene. The dialogue Pope Francis helped foster would contribute not only to a rapprochement between the two countries, but it was also hoped that this would in turn benefit the Catholic Church: with closer ties between Cuba and the United States, one could envision down the road a progressive political transition in which there would be no bloodshed and no dying down of the Church's presence on the island

Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 however, the United States and the Holy See are once again at an impasse over Cuba: while Francis continues to preach the value of encounter and dialogue as a tool to secure desired aims, Trump, when announcing restrictions on Obama-era measures with regards to Cuba, said that dialogue would be conditioned on the granting of more freedom, notably in the religious sphere, by the Cuban regime, reverting to the *status quo ante* of fifty years of U.S. policy toward Cuba.