

The Pope, Arbiter of Europe Since the Beginning of the Early Modern Period

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ABSTRACT

After the decline of the real and symbolic power of the pope as a medieval sovereign and pontiff bending monarchs to his will, the Holy See nevertheless still sought an arbitral position in Europe. Largely linked to its status as the spiritual and temporal leader of Christianity, the papacy devoted itself to defending this position against sovereigns. In decline during the early modern era, this status of arbiter was revived when the Holy See lost its role as a temporal power, and established itself as a moral mediator, thus paradoxically regaining a universal dimension even beyond Christianity.



Since the work of Alphonse Dupront, it has been common to state that during the early modern era, there was a

transition—via the concept of catholicity—from the medieval notion of Christianity to the notion of Europe. During the eleventh century, the Gregorian Reform had sought to strengthen the pope as the leader of Christianity, giving him a spiritual and universal superiority over sovereigns, which enabled him to arbitrate and to punish the machinations of secular sovereigns. After the papacy's withdrawal to its temporal possessions during the Renaissance, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) sought to restore the pope's spiritual power. Increasing ecclesiastical Romanity made the Bishop of Rome the centre of Catholicism, while the pontiff sought doctrinal infallibility and also intended to enforce his temporal sovereignty. In this sense, Rome became for a very long time the capital of Christianity, in any case of a *Christianitas* it intended to dominate, thanks in part to the weakening of the notion of empire. However in the mid-seventeenth century, this dream republic came up against the political realities of Westphalian Europe.

European powers in fact continually disputed the arbitrational power of the pope stemming from this position as the leader of Christianity. A hierarchy of sovereigns—at the top of which the Holy Roman Emperor, the Most-Christian King and the Catholic King competed for the leading role—was also based on the notion of a temporal leader, a genuine political arbiter. In this regard, the Venetian Interdict, studied by Sylvio Hermann de Franceschi (*Raison d'État et raison d'Église*. 2009), shows the persistence of this model of *princeps christianus*, as well as the variations of symbolic powers in Christianity. This Christian ideal endured with sovereigns well after the Council, but would no longer necessarily be directed by Rome.

The notion of a pope as arbiter of Europe thus conflicted from the outset with the struggle between Christian sovereigns and a Roman pontiff. What legitimacy did the pope have to judge over Europe's affairs as the leader of a Christianity of which powerful and rival sovereigns also sought to be the champion? Paolo Prodi, analyzing the foundations of the pope's legitimacy, presents a political evolution transitioning from neutrality to powerlessness. Long after the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), the pope nevertheless sought to play this role in Europe by way of diplomatic mediations, attempts at authoritarian interventions, or doctrinal and ecclesiastical censure.

During the seventeenth century, the papacy still took part in the majority of international congresses through the presence of a nuncio. Although the diplomacy of Innocent XI at Nijmegen (1668) played a certain role in the alliance among Christian sovereigns for the defence of Vienna, the efforts of the nuncio Chigi at Westphalia (1648) were ineffectual, particularly as catholicity united only a part of Europe and Christian sovereigns. During the eighteenth century, the pope's defence of the temporal interests of the Holy See against attacks in Italy prompted him to enter into concrete negotiations in which he could not offer his mediation, which was often invalidated at the time both in law and fact, as shown by the failure of the nuncio at the Peace of Utrecht (1713). In reality, the good offices of pontifical diplomacy were accepted only to the extent that they momentarily served a particular power and, especially, did not involve the Holy See's Italian possessions. Thus when Louis XV sent back the young infante he was supposed to marry (1725), France appealed to the pontiff as the common father in order to mollify the king of Spain, but nullified this by hardly responding to the pope's attempts at arbitration in matters of the European balance of power.

A discourse inherited from medieval prerogatives was reborn in Rome, a combination of solemn complaints against temporal powers that scorned the sovereign pope, and of the wish to find an arbitrational role that was all the more necessary as it opposed the expansion of regalism: the only remaining weapons were doctrinal and ecclesiastical censure, such as refusals for provisions or indulgences, yet this change precisely demonstrates that the papacy had to withdraw onto its own spiritual terrain, as demonstrated by the work of Bruno Neveu. Confronted with political realities, in the mid-eighteenth century Benedict XIV defended the notion of the pope as conciliator, seeking to once again express a neutral position above the European powers.

However, it was with the negotiations surrounding the Roman question during the nineteenth century that the papacy was to find a true renewal—once it had unwillingly been freed from temporal questions—by henceforth

positioning itself as a moral power. This new mission, which was formulated by Leo XIII and founded on new political (imposed neutrality) and moral bases, had a pacifist goal that took the concrete form of offers of political mediation. In 1885, a first mediation between Spain and Germany over control of the Caroline Islands was followed by a number of others in Europe, as well as in Venezuela (1894) and Ethiopia (1896). Recently explored by Jean-Marc Ticchi (1993), these “good offices, mediations and arbitrations” of the Holy See were in fact revived in the late nineteenth century, and effectively engaged with concurrent efforts from peace movements, even if the pope was not invited to the Hague Peace Conference of 1898. On the other hand, Benedict XV’s attempts at mediation and calls for a truce (Christmas 1914) during the First World War were a failure.

During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is precisely as a moral power that the papacy has sought to once again intervene in international relations. Recognized as a subject of international law by the Lateran Treaty (February 11, 1929), the Holy See founded its offers of arbitration on a moral magisterium expressed by an always-active pontifical diplomacy, and which was promoted thanks to a certain number of memorable addresses, trips and gestures. During the Cold War, successive popes strongly made this voice heard in East-West relations, and not without effectiveness: John XXIII’s call for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) played a certain role in the easing of tensions, as did the efforts of John Paul II during the fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. More recently, Pope Francis certainly played a role in the resumption of diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba. It could be said that Pope Francis’s recent address before the European Parliament (November 25, 2014) formulated and confirmed this contemporary change in the papacy, seeking henceforth to establish itself as a moral figure well beyond *Christianitas* in political and religious domains, as well as social, economic, and ethical ones.

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