

Pope Francis: Renewing Roman Catholic Approaches to Peace

Thomas Massaro♦

Abstract: Under the leadership of Pope Francis, the Roman Catholic Church has renewed its commitment to peace and intensified its pursuit of peaceful settlement of conflicts throughout the world. Through stirring words and rich symbolic actions, Francis has displayed his tireless support for the processes whereby quarrelling parties resolve their differences and together build a more peaceful future. This essay describes four contributions of Francis to peacebuilding: 1) his diplomatic initiatives; 2) his pastoral visits to many countries experiencing conflict; 3) documents published on the topic of peace; and 4) a distinctive structural analysis that informs the pursuit of peace on the part of Francis.

Keywords: Pope Francis • Peace • Roman Catholic Church • Diplomacy • Peacebuilding

Introduction

The central claim of this essay is that Francis has successfully renewed Catholic commitments to peace since his election as pope in 2013. Through stirring words and remarkable symbolic actions, he has fashioned the Roman Catholic Church into an even more effective agent of peace and a better partner for peacebuilding initiatives

♦ Thomas Massaro, S.J., is Professor of Moral Theology at Fordham University. A Jesuit priest of the Northeast Province, he served as professor of moral theology at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, at Boston College, and at Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, where he also served as Dean. Father Massaro holds a doctorate in Christian social ethics from Emory University. Besides teaching courses on many aspects of Catholic social teaching and the role of religion in public life, he seeks to maintain a commitment to hands-on social activism. His most recent book analyzes the social teachings of Pope Francis. Email address: tmassaro@fordham.edu.

and global cooperation that may reduce conflict and challenge the false appeal of extremism and aggression.

Deep in the background of these papal initiatives is an operative spirituality that is world-affirming in nature. The mainstream of contemporary Roman Catholic spirituality interprets Saint Paul's claim that "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20) in a way that affirms not only a supernatural horizon regarding our ultimate destiny but also an ardent desire to improve the condition of the present world. Church teachings and faith-based social involvements contain both immanent and transcendent dimensions. This core spiritual commitment to forging a world of greater prosperity and peace inspires an activist approach that seeks out opportunities to foster social reconciliation within the temporal realm. Such a "transformationalist" spirituality is characteristic of the mainstream of contemporary Catholicism and has motivated the peacemaking agendas of all recent popes.

Heir to this tradition, Pope Francis has embarked on a papal ministry that incorporates the best of two influential spiritual heritages in Western theology. One is Ignatian spirituality, grounded in a series of prayer meditations contained in a sixteenth-century classic called the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus.¹ Though the *Exercises* appear in the form of a simple manual for retreat directors, they have established a distinctive and versatile style of prayerful contemplation practiced by Jesuits and millions of others inspired by Ignatian spirituality to this day. This spirituality emphasizes the active presence of God in the world, the ability of each

¹ Many editions of this classic spiritual work remain in print; among the best in English is David J. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

believer to know and serve the Creator, and growth in spiritual freedom to discern God's will in our lives. The pope's formative decades as a Jesuit have left an indelible mark upon him, as he repeatedly attests in writings, addresses and interviews.² If we indeed have a pope with a special dedication to working for peace and social justice, this may be attributed in large part to the Ignatian influence and "Jesuit DNA" of Francis.

Besides Ignatian spirituality, a second spiritual well from which Pope Francis drinks deeply is Franciscan spirituality. His first act (at the moment of his election 13 March 2013) was the selection of a papal name; by choosing to be known as Francis, he amply demonstrated his great appreciation for the spiritual legacy of the thirteenth-century saint from Assisi, Italy. As Pope Francis has repeatedly explained, three aspects of St. Francis particularly inspire his latter-day namesake. First, the mendicant saint was so widely recognized as being close to the poor that he bears the fond moniker *il poverello di Assisi*, or "the poor humble man." Second, he is frequently portrayed as being especially close to nature—witness the legends of St. Francis preaching to birds and even bargaining with a ravenous wolf. To this saint is attributed the composition of the famous "Canticle of the Creatures," which provides the title of Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*. Third, St. Francis was keenly dedicated to peace. His "Peace Prayer" (which includes the memorable opening line "Make me a channel of your peace") is among the most popular of Christian prayers.

² See the long interview Pope Francis granted early in his papacy: Antonio Spadaro, "Interview with Pope Francis," 18 Aug. 2013, Casa Santa Marta, Vatican City, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html

Further, this “man of peace” conducted a perilous (some would add, quixotic) trip to Damietta, Egypt in 1219 to seek an audience with Sultan Malik al-Kamel in hopes of forestalling further conflict in the bloody Fifth Crusade, the latest in a procession of senseless violence that had convulsed Europe and the Middle East for generations. Though not ultimately successful, the unprecedented summit between these two men did pioneer the practice of interreligious dialogue for peace and mutual understanding. All three of these aspects of Franciscan spirituality—love of the poor, respect for all creation and tireless pursuit of peace—have influenced the initiatives of Pope Francis just as surely as they did the ministry of Saint Francis of Assisi eight centuries earlier.

Against the background of these preliminary observations, the remainder of this essay describes how Pope Francis advances global reconciliation by examining four features of the pope’s advocacy for peace—a distinctive approach that combines symbolic gestures, bold actions, and insightful written and spoken words. These four include: 1) his efforts at forging diplomatic solutions to conflicts; 2) his pastoral visits to many countries; 3) his publishing of many insightful documents; and 4) his use of a structural analysis to inform his judgments regarding peace. Each of the four sections below will include descriptions of the peace-related activities of Francis coupled with analysis of his accomplishments and the strategies behind them. While only a very small selection of the peace-themed activities of Francis will receive attention, noteworthy patterns of priorities and characteristic emphases will emerge.

I propose the overarching thesis that, in promulgating these specific teachings and engaging in the activities that he has undertaken, Francis has positioned the Roman Catholic Church to develop into an even more

effective *agent of peace* and also a more promising *partner for peace* than previous popes. While there is without doubt great continuity between the Jesuit pope and his papal predecessors, Francis has, through words and actions, shaped a distinctive style of advocacy for peace that has achieved a marked increase in commitment to forging a more peaceful world. His emphasis on dialogue, respectful listening, nonviolent resolution of conflicts, and cooperation across boundaries that previously divided people—all these features of his papal leadership make him an innovative leader for the Roman Catholic community in the ways of peace. These expanded commitments have enhanced the ability of the church Francis leads to play an even more constructive role in advancing the cause of peace across the globe.

The work of diplomacy

The long and well-documented history of papal interventions to foster peace includes some impressive twentieth-century efforts. Early in that “bloodiest of centuries,” Pope Benedict XV pleaded for peace as the tragic First World War broke out around him. At the height of the Cold War, Pope John XXIII provided all the good diplomatic offices a pope can offer to help three world leaders (John F. Kennedy of the United States, Nikita Khrushchev of the U.S.S.R., and Fidel Castro of Cuba) resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis and pull the world back from the brink of nuclear annihilation. We are still learning the full story of how “Good Pope John” established a back-channel for the eventual successful negotiations in that October 1962 confrontation and near-disaster. Horrified at the mutual suspicions and evident breakdown of willpower to get beyond ideological and geopolitical competition in order to prevent catastrophe, John spent most of the remaining months of

his life overseeing the writing of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (“Peace on Earth”) which appeared 11 April 1963. Subsequent popes, inspired by John XXIII, have consistently and powerfully denounced war and thrown their considerable weight as moral teachers on the side of negotiated settlements to local and global conflicts.

So Pope Francis inherited a well-developed playbook from which to draw in engaging conflicts as a new pope. As the first Latin American pope, it was not surprising that one of his diplomatic priorities was to help resolve the lingering impasse in Cuban-American relations that had outlived the Cold War and had simmered over a half-century with enmity and mutual recriminations. While a full account may never be publicly available, during the course of the year 2014 Francis served as an intermediary as Presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro positioned themselves to accomplish a breakthrough in relations between the two estranged countries. The assistance of the Vatican was openly acknowledged and Francis was personally thanked by both leaders for brokering this remarkable progress toward the normalization of diplomatic and trade relations, including the end of a devastating trade embargo and a long-awaited relaxation of travel restrictions that had divided families for two generations. If not for the results of the 2016 U.S. presidential election which (at a minimum) placed on hold this breathtaking progress, the world would still be marveling at the stunning contribution to global diplomacy and Latin American regional stability provided by the Argentinian pope.

Interestingly, Pope Francis opted to remain on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean as he provided the good offices that fostered that temporary breakthrough in the Caribbean in the course of 2014.³ He was evidently able

³ However it was not long before he visited both the United States (in a high-profile visit to New York, Philadelphia and Washington in

to sustain the considerable diplomatic momentum required to bring the U.S. and Cuba much closer together through telephone communications, written correspondence and electronic means. However, there have been several noteworthy occasions when the pope's physical presence was clearly decisive in facilitating diplomatic progress. On no occasion was his sheer bodily involvement more prominently on display than in an April 2019 negotiation when Francis invited the Muslim and Christian political leaders of South Sudan to stay overnight in the papal palace at the Vatican. The pope was eager to facilitate a diplomatic solution in that newly independent but sharply divided country, which was on the brink of descending into an internecine bloodbath between rival factions contending for control of land and power. When the two-day retreat and negotiations reached an unsatisfying juncture and hopes for peace were on the brink of collapsing, Francis intervened in an unprecedented way to attempt to break the stalemate. The pope looked the government and opposition leaders directly in the eyes at close range, clutched his own hands in front of his chest and urged them to hold hands and pledge peace while sitting close together on an ornate couch. The pope then literally got down on his hands and knees at the feet of the bickering leaders, kissed their shoes and implored them to continue the dialogue until it yielded more promising results. These dramatic gestures, constituting yet another first in papal history, illustrate the length to which Francis willingly goes in pursuit of peace.⁴ When the eventual peace settlement was indeed

September 2015) and Cuba (in a fleeting Feb. 2016 stopover at the Havana airport where he met with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, as the pope squeezed in this historic interfaith encounter on his way to a pastoral visit to Mexico).

⁴ Jason Horowitz, "Pope Kisses Leaders' Feet as he Begs for Peace," *New York Times*, 12 April 2019, A12.

signed some months later (in January 2020 in Rome, though not in the presence of Francis), each side acknowledged the pope as providing the inspiration for the breakthrough. Both parties to the agreement issued a statement that they “were humbled by the relentless spiritual and moral appeal for peace, reconciliation and fraternity by Pope Francis.”⁵

That incident recalled two sets of strenuous efforts undertaken by Francis in his first year in office, when he engaged in a multipronged campaign to advance peace in the Middle East. Each of these initiatives similarly pivoted on the physical presence of Francis in distinctive ways. His first intervention in that embattled region aimed to halt the escalation of violence in Syria, racked as it was in a bloody multiparty civil war. Establishing the long-enduring #PrayForPeace hashtag on social media, personally presiding over an impressive five-hour outdoor prayer vigil in St. Peter’s Square broadcast to hundreds of millions around the globe on 7 September 2013, and using every opportunity to publicize the need for restraint on all sides, Francis may be credited for a relenting in the airstrikes planned by the allied forces arrayed against the Assad regime and a relinquishing of further sarin gas attacks outside Damascus. Francis’s mobilization of a campaign of spiritual resistance against the escalation indeed “had legs”; as horrific as the situation in Syria continues to be, it may well be even worse today if not for these ongoing peace advocacy efforts.

⁵ This sentence from the text of the agreement appears in an unsigned news story originating with Catholic News Service and appearing as “Rome-brokered Peace Deal Increases Chances of Papal Visit to South Sudan,” 16 Jan. 2020, *America Magazine*, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2020/01/16/rome-brokered-peace-deal-increases-chances-papal-visit-south-sudan?utm_

A similar display of the “soft power” of diplomatic effort that spiritual leaders are especially well-positioned to muster unfolded the next spring when Francis, moved by a visit to the Holy Land, invited the leader of the Palestinian territories Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli President Shimon Peres to the Vatican gardens to pray quietly and then to participate in a joint interfaith prayer service with Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew and Francis himself. That 8 June 2014 event did not utterly change the equation for the prospects of Mideast peace, but did demonstrate the constructive role religious leaders can play in advocating for world peace, especially when a prominent leader like the pope invests time, effort and physical presence to appeal for peace. By participating bodily and at great length in both these strenuous efforts to ease tensions in the Mideast in general and to forestall further violence in Syria specifically, Francis demonstrated how seriously he takes his mandate as vicar on earth of the Prince of Peace.⁶

Further and more recent examples could be provided of papal diplomacy for peace—some ultimately quite successful (such as advocacy for the 2019 peace accords in Colombia) and others with fewer demonstrable results. But even this small sampling allows us to appreciate patterns by which this pope operates in the diplomatic sphere. Some papal observers refer to the “Francis Doctrine,” or alternatively an “artisanal” approach to peacemaking. However we name the pope’s approach, it often features a distinctive one-on-one style, intent to build up trust and warm relations over repeated encounters with fellow world leaders. Francis has been quoted as saying that “peace is the byproduct of many

⁶ Certain details of the events of 2013-14 described in this paragraph appear in pages 78-84 of John L. Allen, Jr., *The Francis Miracle: Inside the Transformation of the Pope and the Church* (New York: Times Books, 2015).

personal relations,” and he certainly displays a knack for achieving just that. Of course, the phrase “the Francis Doctrine” is in some ways a misnomer, since the refreshing personal approach of this pope to peacemaking is actually the opposite of a formal rigid doctrine. It also represents a qualitative intensification of the networking efforts of previous popes in the world of global diplomacy.

In short, Francis will go anywhere, talk to anyone and do anything to keep alive the flame of hope for peaceful resolution of differences among parties. He relies on a personal rapport with world leaders and the “soft power” of popular and faith-based support for diplomatic solutions.⁷ In ways never quite seen before, he keenly aspires to parlay his bonds of affinity with political and religious leaders into real results. His style of personal witness to dialogue sets him apart, and his evident investment in the ways of peace adds an unprecedented sense of urgency to his advocacy for alternatives to violence. The pope who frequently praises the “cultures” of dialogue, of encounter, of accompaniment, and respect for the other practices what he preaches when he turns to his own agenda of advancing peace. While the overarching goal of “reconciliation” is as old as the New Testament,⁸ Pope Francis has advanced the agenda of global reconciliation through the creative intensification of diplomatic techniques and the building up of personal relationships with world leaders that amounts to a

⁷ The phrase “soft power” is closely associated with Joseph S. Nye, Jr., of Harvard University, who coined the term in the 1980s. See his *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs Books of the Perseus Group, 2005).

⁸ See, as just one of many available examples from scripture, 2 Corinthians 5:18-20. These verses speak of “a ministry of reconciliation” given to the church by God and a “message of reconciliation entrusted to us” which makes all Christians “ambassadors for Christ.”

renewal in religious engagements for the cause of world peace.

The pastoral visits of Francis to many countries

A second category of papal activities is the pastoral visit abroad—something accomplished to great effect by the last several popes and already referenced above. In our lifetimes, we have seen the genre of “the papal visit” grow into magnificently elaborate high-profile events, deliberately geared to saturation coverage by global media, and often with some peace-related agenda built in. As of this writing (nine- and one-half years into his papacy), Francis has embarked on over three dozen journeys outside Italy, having now visited well over 50 countries. The success of each of these visits abroad depends on overcoming multiple logistical challenges, not to mention mustering up the considerable energy that is sure to tax any octogenarian facing grueling travel itineraries and multiple back-to-back public appearances. As with the previously treated category of papal activity (the diplomatic initiative), we can only note a small fraction of the efforts of Francis in this regard. But even the small sample presented below reveals much about the creative ways in which Francis is renewing the approach to peace undertaken by Roman Catholic leadership and how he is inviting new partners into the church’s efforts at global peace.

One distinctive feature in the travels of Francis is his utter fearlessness. The itineraries he has chosen display his willingness to take risks and face down dangers of several varieties. One type of risk is the simple and straightforward security risk. Perhaps the clearest example is the pope’s November 2015 visit to Central African Republic, a remote and very poor nation experiencing prolonged fratricidal conflict between

Muslim and Christian factions. Francis's desire to promote peace found him wading into a virtual war zone in Bangui, the capital of that landlocked country. Because of ongoing flare-ups of gun violence between rival local factions, security experts had recommended canceling the trip or truncating it considerably, perhaps whittling it down to a brief papal appearance at the international airport. Brushing aside all these well-founded security concerns, Francis insisted on an ambitious itinerary that found him visiting the city's central mosque and even touring some Muslim neighborhoods where Christians had been targeted for attack just days before he landed. Throughout the visit, Francis pleaded for dialogue and a permanent negotiated peace settlement that would build upon the temporary ceasefire that had mercifully been declared and observed during his visit. The subsequent history of Central African Republic has not been encouraging, as the nation has indeed witnessed further violence and constitutional crises in the years since. But the papal visit of 2015 did provide substantial encouragement to those dedicated to local peacemaking efforts and offered a ray of hope as Pope Francis had intended when he proposed the visit and persevered in his plans against long odds.⁹

Evoking certain parallels to his foray into a zone of violent conflict in Central African Republic, Francis ventured to another African nation, this time Egypt, just days after a series of terrorist bombings targeting Christian churches in Cairo on Palm Sunday of 2017. Some commentators at the time remarked that the pope's lack of concern for his personal safety appears to be the kind of abandon that only someone over eighty years old can afford. But that was not the only type of risk on

⁹ Certain of these details of the pope's visit to the Central African Republic appear in Chris Stein and Somini Sengupta, "In Africa, Pope Makes First Visit to a War Zone," *New York Times*, 30 Nov. 2015, A6.

display during that particular voyage of Francis, or indeed in the course of several other papal travels. Another type of risk involves the risk of rejection, in particular the stinging rebuff that may come at the hands of religious or political leaders who might take exception to the message coming from a prophetic pope. It is one thing when criticism from a world leader reaches you in the friendly confines of your home base; finding oneself buffeted by fierce criticism while visiting unfamiliar territory presents a potentially intimidating challenge. That same trip to Egypt mentioned just above found Francis scolding the local strongman President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for human rights violations, a provocation that created a noticeably frosty atmosphere in the middle of his stay in Cairo.¹⁰ It also found Francis sharing a stage with Muslim leaders at several events in houses of worship and centers of higher learning—a collaboration to which certain conservative Catholics took exception. But Francis was eager not to squander this rare opportunity to appeal to moderate Islamic leaders to denounce radical Islamic ideologies that so often feed terrorism. Once again, he forged forward with his itinerary despite the attendant risks and predictable criticism.¹¹

Two multi-stop papal trips in spring 2019 also included considerable controversy and risk-taking. On 5-7 May, Francis ventured to Bulgaria and North Macedonia—two Balkan nations with miniscule Roman

¹⁰ Jason Horowitz, “Pope Francis, in Egypt, Delivers a Blunt Message on Violence and Religion,” *New York Times*, 29 April 2017, A6.

¹¹ Certain details and analysis of the pope’s visit to Egypt contained in this paragraph appear in Molly Hennessy-Fiskel, “Pope Delivers Antiterrorism, Unity Message,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 April 2017, A2. Others appear in Christopher Lamb, “The Pope in Egypt: Pilgrim for Peace,” *Tablet: The International Catholic Weekly*, 6 May 2017, 4-5.

Catholic populations.¹² Both countries are also rife with an ongoing and rather sharp dispute over refugee policy that in recent years has divided the local Orthodox Christian majorities from the Muslim minorities.¹³ The veneer of cordiality broke down most noticeably when Patriarch Neophyte of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church forbade his clergy from praying or even appearing in public with Francis, and then when a Metropolitan of the same church denounced Francis as in league with the Anti-Christ.¹⁴ Not to be intimidated, the next month Francis conducted his long-scheduled trip to another Eastern European nation—this time, Romania—struggling with a political and religious atmosphere that is fraught with further antagonisms over migration.¹⁵ The repeated messages delivered by Francis there again challenged the local communities to welcome greater numbers of refugees and asylum-seekers, and to practice the Christian virtues of compassion and hospitality even at considerable sacrifice—not the most palatable message amidst the surge of right-wing populism and nationalism currently dominating that region of Eastern Europe.¹⁶

Now, while previous popes undoubtedly ventured to some challenging locales, it is Francis who seems

¹² Barbara Surk, “North Macedonia, Signaling a New Era, Welcomes Francis,” *New York Times*, 8 May 2019, A11.

¹³ Boryana Dzhambazova and Jason Horowitz, “Bulgaria’s Church and State Flinch as Francis Urges Sympathy for Migrants,” *New York Times*, 6 May 2019, A8.

¹⁴ Boryana Dzhambazova, “Bulgarian Orthodox Prelate Rebuffs Pope and Condemns Efforts to Unify Churches,” *New York Times*, 7 May 2019, A8.

¹⁵ Jason Horowitz and Kit Gillet, “Francis Takes Call for Unity to Romania, Warning of Populism’s Dangers,” *New York Times*, 1 June 2019, A8.

¹⁶ Jason Horowitz and Kit Gillet, “Pope Seeks to Mend Ties with Romania’s Orthodox: Urging Crowds Not to be Influenced by ‘Voices and Hurts That Provoke Division,’” *New York Times*, 2 June 2019, 12.

especially drawn to hotspots where his message will be unpopular and where the lack of a sizeable Roman Catholic population makes the voyage all the more perilous. One might even conjecture that assuming such risk and taking up such challenges is a conscious and deliberate component of the strategy of Francis as he plans his travels. Perhaps Francis views these hurdles not as something grimly to be endured and overcome but precisely as a welcome challenge to be embraced with joy and gusto—and as an opportunity to send a message to his global audience about his commitment to dialogue and openness despite the presence of considerable obstacles. While Popes Paul VI, John Paul II and Benedict XVI often used their travels to signal support for Catholic establishments (in places like Poland, Ireland, and the Philippines), Francis appears quite deliberate in selecting outposts where a small Catholic minority will most benefit from a pastoral visit, both for the boost in morale it may provide and for the way that the overall cause of advancing global peace will be nourished with some added momentum of challenge and dialogue.

In this light, Francis's unprecedented 2019 visit to the heart of the Arab world emerges as an especially significant contribution to the pursuit of peace and interreligious dialogue. Nowhere is a Catholic minority more marginalized than on the Arabian peninsula. Even in the relatively tolerant Gulf States—places like the tiny emirate of Abu Dhabi and the greater United Arab Emirates—public Christian worship is either officially banned or highly regulated by Islamic governments under local law. The 3-5 February 2019 pastoral visit by Francis to Abu Dhabi certainly served as a major boon to the struggling Catholic community—mostly composed of foreign nationals serving local oil and tourism industries,

generally under precarious arrangements.¹⁷ But beyond the value of the deeds and gestures of support we have already seen as characteristic benefits of any papal visit, it is important to affirm the effectiveness of some particularly original and well-placed words. For Abu Dhabi is where Francis joined Sheik Ahmad al-Tayyeb, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, in signing the revolutionary “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.”¹⁸

Pledging to work together to promote dialogue, mutual understanding, respect for human rights, and an end to intolerance and violence, the leaders of the world’s two largest faith communities took a major step to improve relations through this landmark document. Both parties pledged to oppose all extremism that so often leads to violence and “to work strenuously to spread the culture of tolerance and of living together in peace; and to intervene at the earliest opportunity to stop the shedding of innocent blood.” No pope had ever taken up a bold initiative quite like this one; by issuing a universal call for tolerance and mutual respect co-signed by top leadership of a religion with which Catholicism has a long history of antagonism, Francis abrogated the entire structure of rivalry and opposition. This action thus placed Roman Catholicism on a new trajectory, stripped of all defensiveness and displaying a greatly enhanced commitment to the ways of dialogue and cooperation with Muslims and all other parties of good will. Though the issuing of this joint declaration was months in the making (involving prolonged interparty negotiations

¹⁷ Jason Horowitz, “Pope, Candid and Blunt, Breaks Some Taboos in Visit to Persian Gulf,” *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 2019, A4.

¹⁸ The full text of this document, presented to the public and signed by Pope Francis 4 Feb. 2019, appears at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/travels/2019/outside/documents/papa-francesco_20190204_documento-fratellanza-umana.html

which necessarily remain confidential), its signing while the pope was visiting the Arabian peninsula itself, the heartland of global Islam, adds great significance.

Documents published by Francis on the topic of peace

Of course, the mere appearance of some high-minded words on a few pages does not resolve all the serious differences at stake, as was obvious when Francis (on this same trip) scolded his Emirates hosts for supporting the horrific Saudi-backed aggression still dragging on in nearby Yemen.¹⁹ More awkward moments on a tense papal visit abroad ensued. But solemn words printed on a page ultimately do matter, as even the heavily conservative Catholic critics of Francis unwittingly attested in registering their deep dismay at papal support for the joint Document on Human Fraternity.²⁰ This groundbreaking interfaith document should of course be read in the context of the many millions of words supporting peace that Francis has uttered or published in such venues as his annual “Messages for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace,” his semi-annual *Urbi et Orbi* addresses, regular Angelus messages, and a wide array of addresses to gatherings of diplomats and various international organizations dedicated to global cooperation. The crucial importance of a peaceful and just

¹⁹ Jason Horowitz, “Pope Makes Historic Gulf Visit, Amid Yemen Crisis and Siege of Christians,” *New York Times*, 4 Feb. 2019, A7.

²⁰ For some particularly trenchant analysis of reactions to the “Document on Human Fraternity,” from conservative Catholic circles and beyond, see Gabriel Said Reynolds, “After Abu Dhabi: Pope Francis and the ‘Document on Human Fraternity,’” *Commonweal*, 12 April 2019, 10-12. A more immediate reaction had previously been provided by Massimo Faggioli, “Pope Francis in Arabia,” posted on the *Commonweal* blog 8 Feb. 2019, at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/pope-francis-arabia>

global order permeates all of these occasions where Francis enjoys opportunities built in to his papal duties to weigh in on global priorities. Francis performed a further service by gathering up the principles and priorities he had expressed on many such occasions into the text of his October 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (“Brothers All: On Fraternity and Social Friendship”) that functions as a compendium of his teachings on the urgency of social reconciliation and the pursuit of peace, made all the more poignant by the circumstances of its publication, at the height of a deadly global pandemic.²¹

Space permits only cursory coverage of the content of these documents treating peace issues over the span of nearly a decade. To provide a mere taste of what Francis says and writes about peace, a quick look at representatives of just one category, namely the World Day of Peace messages, will have to suffice. These annual messages, released in advance of the actual January 1 celebration, consist of brief (though substantive) treatments of a single theme relating to peace. Since Pope Paul VI inaugurated the custom of publishing these statements in 1968, they have covered a wide range of weighty topics, illustrating the dictum that peace is more than just the absence of war.²² Specific efforts “to get the shooting to stop” are laudable, but by no means exhaust the full meaning of peace nor suffice to create a satisfactorily peaceful world. As the recent contributions of Francis to this genre attest, there will always be more to say about the path to peace.

²¹ This encyclical was published 3 Oct. 2020 and appears at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

²² This simple but profound truth appears in no. 78 of the 1965 Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*, otherwise known as the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World.

The first World Day of Peace message (for 1 January 2014) issued by Pope Francis treats the theme of universal solidarity. Francis proposes the virtue of solidarity as the basis of all efforts “to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace.”²³ Solidarity emerges as a vital (but all too often tragically absent) component of social harmony. As such, it is the perfect antidote to the “globalization of indifference” that has been bemoaned by the three most recent popes. In effect, within months of his papal election Francis used this teaching opportunity to share with the broadest audience his diagnosis for what most plagues our conflicted world. The chief villain he identifies is humanity’s collective deficit of fellow-feeling, which deprives us of a persevering commitment to human brotherhood and sisterhood. It is no wonder, then, that five years later this same pope would be eager to collaborate with a Muslim counterpart in affirming the breakthrough “Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together.”

If Francis utilized the occasion of his first World Day of Peace to issue a general call regarding the human motivation for peacemaking, his subsequent annual messages may be portrayed as addressing the more specific conditions for building a more peaceful world. The 2015 message, bearing the title “No Longer Slaves, but Brothers and Sisters,” treats the scourge of human trafficking for purposes of sex and labor exploitation.²⁴ It represents just one of many occasions on which Francis

²³ The full text of the 1 Jan. 2014 message of Pope Francis for the World Day of Peace (titled “Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace”) appears at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20131208_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2014.html

²⁴ This 2015 Message for World Day of Peace appears at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20141208_messaggio-xlvi-giornata-mondiale-pace-2015.html

seeks to publicize the urgency of ending this form of modern-day slavery, which is so often enabled by global criminal syndicates that take advantage of weak governments in war-torn regions to perpetuate the horrors of enslaving and trafficking young victims. Francis is eager to highlight the linkages between peace and the end of such human exploitation. Progress toward either goal enables and encourages progress toward the other.

The 2016 message, bearing the title “Overcome Indifference and Win Peace,” affords Francis yet another opportunity to identify the proper attitudes that foster peace. Those who overcome indifference to God, neighbor, and the natural environment (the document contains brief sections on each of these three objects of serious concern) are well-positioned to be peacemakers. Note the prominence of the environment in this message, which appeared just a few months after Francis had published *Laudato Si'*, his landmark ecological encyclical. Another prominent theme in the 2016 message is the practice of mercy, which emerges as the endpoint of “the conversion of hearts” and “the overcoming of indifference.”²⁵ Again, the centrality of mercy is no mere coincidence, as this document was released during the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy which Francis had called to highlight this key theme, which resonates strongly in both Ignatian and Franciscan spirituality. Saint Ignatius (who put down his soldier’s sword at the time of his conversion) and Saint Francis (whose strenuous efforts to foster peace in an era of Crusades were described above) have both inspired peacemakers for centuries, and Francis is eager to tie the theme of mercy, close to his heart especially during that

²⁵ These two phrases appear numerous times in the text of Pope Francis’s Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 Jan. 2016, at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20151208_messaggio-xlix-giornata-mondiale-pace-2016.html

holy jubilee year, to their legacies of commitment to peace.

The messages for World Day of Peace for 2018 (titled “Migrants and Refugees: Men and Women in Search of Peace”²⁶) and 2019 (titled “Good Politics is at the Service of Peace”²⁷) continue this pattern whereby Francis adroitly connects peace to urgent contemporary topics to which it is related, even if the linkages require some explanation. The global migration crisis is certainly one of these, as is (to paraphrase a central paragraph in the 2019 peace message) the global crisis of political virtue we are experiencing today. In each case, Francis provides a succinct but compelling diagnosis of these profound problems, with the contention that, until global society addresses each crisis adequately, peace will surely elude our grasp. Deficits of concern about the nearly 100 million refugees and displaced persons currently seeking resettlement, and about the eclipse of the fundamental political values of honesty and fairness, absolutely feed conflict throughout the world. It is noteworthy that the pope’s analysis contains at once a “theological reading” of each crisis (for example, citing scripture regarding virtues such as hospitality and obedience to God’s law) and an appeal for improvement that is readily comprehended and easily appreciated by all readers, whether secular or religious in orientation. Catholic social teaching documents in general, and by extension these annual messages on peace, have for decades acknowledged this dual audience—even explicitly

²⁶ The text of this 1 Jan. 2018 message appears at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20171113_messaggio-51giornatamondiale-pace2018.html

²⁷ The text of this 1 Jan. 2019 message appears at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20181208_messaggio-52giornatamondiale-pace2019.html

addressing their message “to all people of good will” (John XXIII was the first pope to feature this phrase at the opening of a social encyclical--see his 1963 *Pacem in Terris*). Francis repeatedly affirms his delight in the opportunity to offer words of instruction and encouragement to all peacemakers, whether they share the Catholic faith or not.

While space does not allow coverage of the most recent of these annual messages, the attentive reader will notice the omission in the sequence above of Francis’s message for World Day of Peace for 2017—deliberately reserved for last because of its thematic significance. In this document, rather than engaging a single discrete aspect or application of peacemaking, Francis offers a substantial reflection on the very nature of peace itself.²⁸ Under the title “Nonviolence: A Style of Politics for Peace,” the document revisits a central long-standing tension within the major Christian approaches to war and peace: whether the exceptionless stance of nonviolence is a necessary implication of the teachings of Jesus regarding love of neighbor. Is creedal pacifism the only authentic Christian response to evil in the world, or may we justify the use of some force, as in the just war theory that has shaped the mainstream of Christian theology since the fourth century? Francis does not, of course, settle the entire matter in the seven pages of this document, but he does signal a greater openness to the approach of absolute nonviolence than any previous pope. By heaping words of praise upon practitioners and proponents of pacifism (Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi) and reminding us of the nonviolence practiced and lauded by Jesus, Francis

²⁸ The text of this 1 Jan. 2017 message appears at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/peace/documents/papa-francesco_20161208_messaggio-l-giornata-mondiale-pace-2017.html

promotes nonviolence as an attractive and principled lifestyle. In enumerating the many ways in which nonviolent means of resisting evil are often highly effective in halting aggressors, Francis builds the case that a resort to violence, even in the name of justice and eventual peace, is often more of a temptation than a prudent and well calculated necessity.

One may ask: Does this seeming papal endorsement of nonviolence transform the Roman Catholic Church into a “peace church,” such as the Mennonites, Anabaptists, Quakers, and others who form an historically pacifist wing of the Protestant Reformation? Has Francis definitively renounced the just war approach? The answers to these questions, while far from simple, are in the negative—at least for the time being. This document appears to have been produced at a time (late in 2016) when the pope’s position on the justified use of force was evolving, and available evidence suggests that Catholic leadership continues to conduct significant re-evaluation of the just war approach that has guided its judgments for so many centuries. A few months before that 2017 World Day of Peace message was drafted, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (along with Pax Christi International) had sponsored a conference called “Nonviolence and Just Peace: Contributing to the Catholic Understanding of and Commitment to Non-violence,” held in Rome during April 2016. The two-page final statement released by the delegates at that conference, in the words of one astute observer, “called upon the Catholic Church, instead of continuing to teach just war theory, to turn to the framework of ‘just peace’ built around the precepts of Gospel nonviolence.”²⁹ A

²⁹ Christian Nikolaus Braun, “Pope Francis on War and Peace,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 15: 1 (Winter 2018): 63-87 at 63. This article contains full citations to the Vatican documents mentioned in this paragraph.

second conference (under similar sponsorship and this time counting several influential bishops and cardinals among its 80 delegates) was convened in Rome during April 2019, this time titled “Paths of Nonviolence: Toward a Century of Peace.”³⁰ Once again, the deliberations shed light on the advantages of creative alternatives to the use of force, such as the “just peacemaking” framework pioneered by the late American Protestant ethicist Glen Stassen.³¹

Where do these recent developments leave the Catholic Church? Obviously, much uncertainty remains about the future status of just war thinking within church teachings. Francis included further cautions about continued reliance on the just war approach in chapter 7 of his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, but questions about an exceptionless approach of nonviolence remain open. While a moral reevaluation of the church’s previous concessions regarding warfighting is clearly underway, it would be precipitous to expect a rapid disavowal or complete repudiation of all justifications of the legitimate use of force in the near future.³² While Pope Francis himself has signaled an enhanced appreciation of the prophetic witness of pacifism in authentic Christian discipleship, he appears averse to holding nations to the absolute standard of nonviolence as they defend their sovereignty and exercise statecraft, such as

³⁰ For details regarding this conference, see Joshua J. McElwee, “Vatican’s Second Conference on Nonviolence Renews Hope for Encyclical,” posted on the website of *National Catholic Reporter* 23 April 2019 at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/vaticans-second-conference-nonviolence-renews-hope-encyclical>

³¹ Glenn Stassen, *Just Peacemaking: Ten Practices for Abolishing War*, second edition (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

³² See, Christian Nikolaus Braun, “Papal White and Shades of Green: On the Tides of Just War,” *Global Studies Quarterly* 2 (3) (July 2022):1-10.

when they use force to counter terrorism or protect innocent people from genocide.

To provide one example, when asked (during an August 2014 airborne press conference) about the permissibility of U.S. airstrikes against targets in Syria to halt a murderous campaign of the so-called Islamic State (commonly known as ISIS), Pope Francis affirmed a central tenet of the just war tradition with the words, “it is licit to stop the unjust aggressor.”³³ Similarly, in the months after Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Francis reiterated that it is licit for a nation to take up arms in self-defense. This has led some informed commentators to infer that, while we may be witnessing a gradual development of doctrine favoring nonviolence, there is likely to remain room in any papal teaching in the foreseeable future for approval (or at least toleration) of some use of coercive force, at least under strictly defined conditions.³⁴ Of course, all predictions about the future trajectory of church teachings are perilous. While some speculate that Francis favors a broader embrace of nonviolence (indeed, the attendees of that 2016 Vatican conference called for a new papal encyclical to renounce the just war theory³⁵), it is impossible to predict how Francis or any future pope will instruct the faithful regarding the ways of peace.

³³ Braun, “Pope Francis on Peace and War” (as above), 75. This article documents the papal words and the significance of the underlying arguments in great detail.

³⁴ This is the central argument of Braun (op. cit.). Pope Francis is portrayed in this article as likely to perpetuate the age-old tension within Christian teachings between a prophetic prohibition on violence, on one hand, and a set of practical concessions to living in a fallen world marked by violence and evil, on the other hand.

³⁵ The text of the two-page April 2016 statement appears at: <https://nonviolencejustpeace.net/files.wordpress.com/2016/05/appeal-to-catholic-church-on-gospel-nonviolence.pdf>

The structural analysis that informs the judgments of Pope Francis regarding peace

Key to this final section describing a central feature of the contributions of Francis regarding peace are two terms: “peacebuilding” and “structural analysis.” There have perennially been many ways of talking about peace. Recent decades have witnessed a new convention within the community of peace advocates, whereby peacebuilding has emerged as the most highly favored term of all. Among its advantages is its inclusiveness. The previously regnant term “peacekeeping” assumes of course that there was a peace to keep in the first place—an assumption that is sadly counterfactual in a world where the great majority of armed conflicts unfold, not between nations, but rather within nations, especially when long-simmering ethnic or other resentments flare up in insurrections, rebellions, and wide-ranging acts of terrorism due to concerns that have long gone unaddressed. Similarly, the term “peacemaking” lacks the depth of attention to process and underlying structures that peacebuilding connotes. More than ever, the contours of contemporary conflicts across the globe demand that we turn our attention to practical measures to prevent lingering local disputes from breaking out into massive violence, with innocent civilians all too often tragically caught in the crossfire. Efforts to identify and defuse grievances and antagonisms are infinitely preferable to mere reaction to violence once the shooting has begun.

In short, the recent widespread adoption of the term peacebuilding (along with its companion phrase in the peace community, “conflict transformation”) represents a great advance in the direction of holistic approaches to the challenges of addressing armed aggression in the world. We shape our imaginations more appropriately

when we acknowledge the inevitability of conflict among diverse parties and conduct a realistic reckoning with the ongoing task of reducing those tensions wherever and however possible. In *Fratelli tutti*, Francis himself dedicates seven paragraphs (nos. 237-43) to the task of acknowledging “the inevitability of conflict” and pivoting from “legitimate conflict” into a process of forgiveness. This trajectory matches the priorities and insights of the “just peacemaking” paradigm (pioneered by Protestant ethicist Glenn Stassen, as mentioned above, along with many collaborators) as well as the impressive work of the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, an international movement of many partners founded in 2004.³⁶

Perhaps more prominently than any world leader, Francis communicates his ardent desire to help stop conflicts in any way possible. We have already reviewed several instances of the “Francis Doctrine” at work in negotiations in various regions of the world. What may escape notice is the resolve of Pope Francis to offer more than effective “emergency management” responses to crises. For these papal efforts to fully qualify as peacebuilding, after all, they must also address the root causes of violence and help create the conditions that will foster a more peaceful world. When it comes to potentially lethal conflict, prevention is even more consequential than reaction. While we naturally rejoice

³⁶ See Robert J. Schreiter, R. Scott Appleby, and Gerard F. Powers, eds., *Peacebuilding: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Praxis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010). This informative volume, replete with illustrative case studies of social reconciliation as well as treatment of the theoretical foundations of conflict transformation, is considered a founding document of the peacebuilding movement in Catholic circles. Theological ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill, herself a consultant for the Catholic Peacebuilding Network, dedicates the final chapter of her *Blessed are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019) to an encouraging description of the impressive peacebuilding movement.

when warring parties agree to put down the weapons of war, a superior scenario unfolds when the human community engages in serious long-term planning for a future where all conflict is resolved on a basis of nonviolence and mutual respect. The “just peacemaking” approach mentioned above proposes practices and institutions that provide for sustainable restructuring that will prevent further grievances and injustices. Reflecting these insights distilled over decades of peace advocacy, Pope Francis has displayed a perceptive “structural eye”—a set of skills for detecting and addressing economic, political, and social structures that exert influence within conflict situations and their outcomes throughout the world.

While a structural approach is far from brand new, Francis has pioneered methods by which religious and ethical advocacy may combine positive and normative considerations through structural motifs. Economists may easily perceive a structural analysis at work in the way Francis addresses such items as global labor relations, economic inequality, and injustices in patterns of world trade and development. The pope’s structural perspective is on display when he responds analytically to the refugee crisis, in the way he diagnoses the many contemporary challenges threatening healthy family life, and in his appeal to address environmental degradation.³⁷ In each sphere of social concern, papal writings, addresses and initiatives repeatedly point to causal factors and urge constructive action on the part of agents possessing sufficient power to address them. Francis

³⁷ The structural analysis of Pope Francis regarding each of these issues—economic inequality, labor justice, environmental degradation, challenges to family life, and the refugee crisis—receives attention in chapters 1-5 of Thomas Massaro, S.J., *Mercy in Action: The Social Teachings of Pope Francis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

consistently displays a structural approach to numerous social problems; as a result, he is empowered to offer much more than mere moralizing on controversial issues. The acuity of his social analysis enables insightful diagnosis and prescription that engages realities and inspires a compelling ethical vision capable of transforming an intolerable status quo into a hopeful future.

Peacebuilding is another area that fits this hope-laden pattern, most notably on those occasions when Francis addresses the deep causes of armed conflict and the global failure to restrict the availability of weapons. The pope's very first Message for World Day of Peace (for 1 January 2014) pled "for the nonproliferation of arms and for disarmament of all parties, beginning with nuclear and chemical weapons disarmament."³⁸ Eighteen months later, disappointed by a global lack of progress toward this goal, Francis took advantage of a unique opportunity to issue a stern warning about the dangers associated with the ongoing practice of arms sales of all sorts. His voyage to the United States included back-to-back addresses to a rare Joint Session of the U.S. Congress (on 24 September 2015) and to the General Assembly of the United Nations (on 25 September). The texts of the pope's speeches on these high-profile occasions pinpoint the single reform he seems convinced will foster peace like no other: the abolition of the global arms trade, which he refers to as a practice drenched in innocent blood.³⁹ Under his leadership, the Vatican has

³⁸ See, n. 23 above.

³⁹ The full text of the address of Francis to the U.S. Congress appears at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html. The address to the U.N. appears at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html

continued to spearhead United Nations efforts to halt the proliferation, deployment and testing of nuclear weapons.

By so strenuously opposing this global structure of evil, Francis emphasized a systemic approach to the causes of violence—in this case, the very existence of a global arms bazaar that practically guarantees that deadly weapons large and small will fall into the wrong hands. The pope's facility at structural analysis is amply on display when he addresses the arms trade, as he excoriates warped incentive structures that place profits and power dynamics over the sanctity of human life and the safety of the most vulnerable in zones of endemic conflict. The widespread sale of arms systems, large and small in scope, coupled with a black market for contraband weapons and ammunition, absolutely enables global terrorism and prolongs the destabilization of entire regions.

Further, the pope's diagnosis regarding the root cause of so much carnage illustrates the sterling explanatory power of that term peacebuilding. We actively build peace through strenuous opposition to arms sales; bold activism of this type helps create the conditions for peace. Peacebuilders of all stripes may also learn from the communication strategy employed by Francis in this regard. Never to be overlooked is the advantage of choosing one's audience with special care. On these momentous occasions, Francis was directing his words to precisely the correct audiences, as the U.S. is by far the top global supplier of arms, and reform measures currently before the U.N. possess the capacity to tear down structures of violence and build up structures of peaceful cooperation worldwide.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ The landmark U.N. Arms Trade Treaty was adopted by the General Assembly on 2 April 2013 and went into force 24 Dec. 2014. As of this writing, 141 nations have signed it, of which 31 have yet to

Conclusion

As Francis has insisted from the start of his papacy, the way forward is through dialogue. As the Document on Human Fraternity attests, “Peace requires and demands that we adopt dialogue as our path, mutual understanding as our code of conduct and reciprocal understanding as our method and standard.”⁴¹ For Francis, true leadership for peace always transcends mere crisis management. Genuine peace promotion includes efforts at social transformation—improving things from the causal roots. From an ecclesial perspective, Francis pursues peace as a matter of church mission, continuous with the theological goals of spreading the gospel of peace and advancing the ministry of universal reconciliation. Francis adapts these traditional Christian themes to the contemporary situation; he perceives a dire need to overcome regnant cultural forces that divide peoples—xenophobia, hatred, and extremism. Indeed, in our age of suspicion and aggressive nationalism, Francis has become a premier voice for building bridges between people, not walls that further divide people.

Not satisfied merely to denounce violence and the destructive attitudes and institutions that support it, Francis presents an appealing positive vision of dialogue and moral formation. Above all, he provides a model of the urgent commitment to constructive dialogue that holds out the promise of overcoming all conflict and terrorism. In doing so, Pope Francis not only renews the Roman Catholic tradition of advocacy for peace but points

ratify it, including the U.S. 54 states have yet to join the treaty at all. As Francis notes, further progress is crucial, and depends primarily on the political will of nations to foster peace despite certain sacrifices.

⁴¹ See n. 18 above.

the way forward for all people of good will to participate in effective peacebuilding in our troubled world.

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