

The Vatican's political role in the international sphere

By John E. Robbins

The terms "Vatican" and "Holy See" tend to be used interchangeably, though there is a distinction in precise usage. The Vatican is a regular member of international organizations such as the Universal Postal Union, the International Union for the Protection of Literary and Historical Works and others concerned with matters essentially of a state-administrative nature. The Holy See conducts the international activity of the Roman Church, has diplomatic relations with about 80 countries and representation in numerous international organizations of a political character, including the United Nations and the European Community.

The Vatican is the world's smallest state, with an area of 108 acres and a resident population of only a few hundred; the Holy See reaches out to something like 600 million members of the Roman Catholic communion. There are very few centres in the world having established lines of communication and influence with a comparable number of people; and there are fewer with national "branches" openly active in so many countries. From this arises the importance of the Holy See as a centre of diplomatic activity.



Dr. Robbins had a distinguished career in the educational field before entering the Department of External Affairs in 1970 as Canada's first Ambassador to the Holy See. He was editor-in-chief of Encyclopaedia Canadiana from 1953 to 1958, then secretary-treasurer of the Social Science Research Council and Humanities Research Council for two years and president of Brandon College (later Brandon University) from 1960 to 1969. Before his entry into these fields, Dr. Robbins was assistant director of the Education Division, and then director of the Education and Information Divisions of the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (now Statistics Canada) for 21 years. He retired from the Vatican post in 1973 and has been succeeded by Paul Tremblay, Associate Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs.

The dual nature of representation in the countries with which the Holy See has diplomatic relations should be kept in mind. A Vatican diplomat abroad (1) the channel of communication with the national Church and (2) the intermediary between the Holy See and the national government. Diplomats accredited to the Holy See have intergovernmental responsibilities only, and avoid involvement in questions on which the Church takes a doctrinal position, such as divorce, birth control and abortion, even though these may have important social and political implications. The Holy See's diplomats similarly avoid discussion of such matters with the governments to which they are accredited, leaving it to take place, if at all, between the national hierarchy and the national government.

The prime interest of the Holy See in its dealings with other countries is to ensure freedom for the Church in particular, and for religion in general, to develop without state interference. Unless or until Rome is satisfied that a reasonable measure of freedom is allowed, diplomatic relations are not established. Hence the lack of formal relations with Marxist-oriented governments, except those of Cuba and Yugoslavia. In the last few years there have been behind-the-scenes talks with other major Communist regimes, China excepted, aimed at improving the Church's position; and it seems not unlikely that in the foreseeable future, diplomatic relations will be established with some of them. But serious obstacles remain, even in the infrastructure of the Church. The Ukrainian Catholic Church, for instance, which is in communion with Rome, was liquidated in the U.S.S.R., and its spokesmen elsewhere are highly critical of efforts of the Holy See to have amicable discussions with Moscow.

Vatican Council II clearly decided to facilitate dialogue with the Marxist-inspired countries when it established the new Secretariat for Non-Believers. At the same time it demonstrated a conviction