

# Asia and the Holy See

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## **The existing distance between Asia and the Holy See: is the Holy See truly relevant for Asian diplomats?**

In Asia, where Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism or Islam are dominant, Christianity (Catholicism in particular) is largely regarded as foreign and, hence, Christians (particularly Catholics) are a minority, with some notable exceptions. In Japan, for instance, the proportion of Catholics constantly stays below 0.5% of the population and it is unlikely that it will rise sizeably in the future.

Against this backdrop, Asian countries give rather low priority to their diplomatic relations with the Holy See. For instance, many of them started official diplomatic relations with the Holy See rather lately. Amongst these countries Japan may be considered as the oldest case, since she established her diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1942. As recent as 67 years ago, I emphasize. By the way, it may be fair to mention that the Holy See started to send its *nuncios* to Tokyo in 1919, 23 years prior the establishment of diplomatic relations, although the term *nuncio* was limited to religious affairs. Similar to the term of *nuncios* used in Malaysia, Myanmar, Brunei and Laos. Furthermore, many Asian countries that have diplomatic relations with the Holy See actually do not have resident ambassadors here in Rome. This means that their ambassadors are assigned to neighbouring countries such as Switzerland and Germany and who are also responsible for looking after their diplomatic relations with the Holy See as non-resident ambassadors. Some Asian countries have no diplomatic relations with the Holy See as yet, as for example: Malaysia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos. Moreover, it might be the case that even countries that have resident-ambassadors' offices here in Rome are not willing to apply. To be honest that is unfortunately the case in my country.

Thus, for assessing the relation between Asia and the Holy See it is inescapable to look into the aspect of the religious and cultural differences. As the late Japanese cardinal Hamao stressed several years ago, there exists a long distance between Asia and the Holy See not only from a geographical point of view, but also from a moral one. Is this religious and cultural distance surmountable? My view is that this sense of distance is unlikely to be

substantially diminished in the near future<sup>1</sup>, since both have old civilizations, and hence, have few reasons to suggest a change in attitude.

So the question raised before us is whether or not it is justifiable for Asians to give higher priority to their diplomatic relations with the Holy See, while the sense of distance, particularly religious distance, between both parts is very unlikely to diminish in the near future.

My answer to this question is: «Yes it is justifiable». If my answer had been negative, I am sure the host of this seminar would never have requested me to address you here as I do now. I will soon tell you on what grounds I believe it is necessary to give higher priority to the diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

### **Why I chose to come to the Holy See**

Considering such argument, I would like to tell you a bit about myself. For the last 10 to 15 years I have written a number of essays for several newspapers and magazines – mostly on comparative studies of cultures and civilizations – and participated in seminars as panellist, mostly in Japan but sometimes also overseas.

I continue to study cultures, partly because I realized that without discerning or knowing the cultural differences, especially concerning religions which often have a substantial impact on international relations, we diplomats may misjudge the countries which we serve.

Three years ago I wrote and published a book on civilizations comparative studies on polytheistic civilization and monotheistic civilization where I argued that generally speaking, religious mentality has an undeniable impact on politics, diplomacy and so forth. Although a number of newspapers gave some comments on my book in book review columns, its sale was not successful at all, with very little turnover. Unfortunately.

As a natural extension of my argument in the book, I fostered the wish to carry out a civilizational dialogue with clergies, if possible, within the Holy See. That is why three and half years ago, I requested my government to send me here. A deputy minister in charge, who appeared to be a bit surprised, just asked me: «Are you really sure?» I answered: «Yes. I am very, very sure». A month later I received a positive response.

Since I assumed my post here, whenever I visit the Holy See's officials in order to introduce myself, I refer to my interest in promoting civilizational dialogue with the priests here. A cardinal said to me: «Oh, Ambassador, you came to the right place simply because we made the Western Civilization». In the last 40 years as a diplomat, I met a lot of people but it was the first time I met someone who affirmed a statement in such a direct manner.

In the last two and half years, I kept enjoying civilizational dialogues with clergies present in Rome. I gave a number of interviews which were put in the

<sup>1</sup> Kagefumi Ueno, *Are Christianity and Japanese culture reconcilable?*, in «Carità Politica», sett. 2008.

media present in Rome, or gave essays and lectures on religions and cultures in Italy or in neighbouring countries. I am content with them. There is only one problem: that is to say, I haven't got enough time to devote to myself towards writing essays or studying cultures. Why?

### **Unexpectedly the Holy See keeps me busy**

The reason is: I found out that the Holy See promotes a lot of significant activities worthy to be reported to Tokyo, which keeps me unexpectedly busy. I am not considering their religious activities; I am talking about the non religious aspects of their work. After all, as an ambassador from a non-Christian country, I am not required to follow religious affairs i.e. I am expected to follow only the non-religious aspects of the Holy See's work. Nonetheless, I am kept busy, because throughout the year the Pope often receives heads of State, heads of governments, or heads of international bodies. Many of them are from non-Christian countries. Why not make a report? Moreover, in the last three years, all the heads of State and governments of the G8 came to Rome to meet the Pope, except for the Japanese Prime Minister. As a matter of course, their meetings with the Pope are given high coverage by the international media as well as by their domestic media, which in exchange encourages foreign leaders to meet with the Pope. In this respect the Holy See possesses a sort of magnetism, i.e. the Holy See is a centre of international diplomacy. A few months after I started my job here, I convinced myself that the Holy See is an important actor of the international community, even when religious aspects are set aside.

### **Reasons for having diplomats here: four factors**

Throughout my experience of the last years, I can now underline at least four factors which maintain the Holy See's international stature high and significant, which would justify even non-Christian countries to send their diplomats here in Rome. I am going to mention them one by one.

#### **FACTOR 1: MORAL POWER**

In early January 2007, a few months after I had settled down in Rome, all the diplomats, including my wife and I, were invited by the Pope, to hear his New Year's speech on the international situation in the Sala Regia of the Vatican's Palace. Incidentally this salon is the same one where three young Japanese envoys were ushered in to meet with Pope Gregory XIII in 1585, only a decade before Japan imposed a ban on Christianity. At Sala Regia, like every year, the Pope's message to the diplomats was addressed in French. It took about forty five minutes. His message encompassed almost all important topics, ranging from global issues such as poverty, disarmament, peace making, conflicts settlement, human rights, minority, immigration and climate change to regional issues of Africa, Mid-East, South Asia and so forth. He covered about 45 issues of great

concern. The next day, his message was reported to every corner of the globe, having quite an impact on the international society, while my office made a big report to Tokyo.

Through his message, I perceived and discerned his determination to play a role of 'look out' or 'guardian' of the international society. That is why he repeatedly sends similar messages or warnings to the international community on which my office generally makes reports to my government. If you listened to his speech without knowing who delivered it, you might have thought it was given by the Secretary General of the United Nations (Un).

Yes, the two men have a similar role, in a sense that both the Pope and the Secretary General of the Un play an important role as 'international (moral) custodians'.

Then, you may be tempted to ask why the Pope's messages draw so much international attention. The reason is in part because he represents 1.1 billion Catholics. But more fundamentally, it is believed that his moral power or moral authority was strengthened after the Holy See lost almost all its territory in 1870. Until then the Holy See used to own a vast territory which included the central regions of Italy, therefore, the Holy See used to be a temporal power like Spain or France. As a temporal State she had business interests to protect. She had citizens and territories to protect. She had national interests to which she had to pay attention to. After she lost her territory, however she became free from 'national interests'. When you listen to the messages of the President of the United States or the Prime Minister, of say, India, you naturally interpret them as a reflection of their own interests. When the Pope speaks about international affairs, you don't interpret the message of the Holy See as the message of an international actor vested by national interests. Such a position enables the Pope to talk about international issues from humanitarian or ethical, moral perspectives. Paradoxically, by losing secular interests, the Holy See was able to upgrade her moral power.

Considering the way the Pope's messages are diffused or emanated world wide by the media, you may certainly affirm that the Pope is one of the most significant and effective 'opinion leaders'.

A further point of discussion I could raise is whether or not the Pope's messages are heeded by significant international actors and by other important international institutions, whether his voice has an impact on them. My answer is double faced: «No» in short time span, but «Yes» in the long run. It is known that the previous Pope, John Paul II, raised his objections to President Bush against the raid in Iraq in 2003. At that time the Pope's advice was ignored by the United States, but that did not mar the value of the Pope's words and actions. On the contrary, the fact that the Pope had made a suggestion and that the United States did not wish to listen to it demonstrated the important role of the Holy See. I do believe that the international community is in need of a moral guardian like the Pope or the Secretary General of the Un. No one else could replace his role. In

this sense, the Pope should be looked upon as an international, irreplaceable resource. He is so important not only because he is the head of the Catholic Church, but simply because he is capable of extending humanitarian, moral messages everywhere.

Bearing in mind the potential impact of the Pope's voice, some occidental countries appear to make conscious efforts to encourage the Pope to extend messages concerning important issues perfectly in line with the Holy See's policy, which can be considered a wise policy!

In March 2009, Japanese government invited Mgr. D. Mamberti, the Holy See's Foreign Secretary to Japan, for a meeting. He had a 150 minutes talk with the Japanese Foreign Affairs Minister H. Nakasone, which encompassed almost all the major international issues. After the meeting, Minister Nakasone told me that he appreciated and enjoyed the dialogue with the Holy See which appeared, he found, fresh and a bit different from other dialogues with temporal States. Particularly, he was impressed by the Holy See's view on the economic world crisis; such crisis according to the Holy See was caused and aggravated because financial circles pursued business interest discarding moral values. Mgr. Mamberti's visit was all the more important because it was the first official visit by a Vatican Foreign secretary to Japan since the establishment of diplomatic relations, 67 years ago.

#### FACTOR 2: CAPABILITY TO DIFFUSE MESSAGES

In November 2006, I presented the Pope my letter of credence issued by the Japanese Emperor. For about fifteen minutes, I had a pleasant *tête-à-tête* conversation with him in his private library. Our conversation covered, amongst many subjects, also the nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsular. Then, on that day or the following morning, almost all the media of the world – international or local, major or minor – reported about our conversation. More accurately about the Pope's remarks. The Republic of Korea, in particular: the evening news of their television channels dealt with the topic as top news, with an image of my wife and I, in kimono. The Korean news was later rebroadcasted by Japanese television.

Besides, I found that it was not just major media who dealt with such news. Many local Catholic media present all over the world – in Asia, North and South America, Europe etc. – also reported the news.

Later on, I gave interviews to the official newspaper of the Holy See, «L'Osservatore Romano», or news agencies such as Zenit, inside the Vatican, and Ewtn. Again, I found that interviews I gave in Rome were reproduced and conveyed in places of various continents by local Catholic media. For instance Ewtn, a supplier of television programs in Rome, has an affiliation with several hundred Catholic cable television stations in the United States and many stations in Latin America. So, if you say something through then, it may reach various country side villages or cities of the United States or Latin America. From such

a perspective, I found the Holy See worthy of being challenged by Asian diplomats.

FACTOR 3: INTELLECTUAL POWER: THE HOLY SEE ATTRACTS INTELLECTUALS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD

Another surprising aspect about the Holy See is the frequency with which it promotes seminars and workshops within its palaces or in other institutions, with the participation of a great number of world experts.

For instance, the Pontifical Academy of Science hosts the Advisory Committee once every two years. In last November the Committee had a plenary session on the “Evolution of Universe and Humans” where, for four days, prominent foreign scholars discussed about the theme from various scientific points of view. I attended some of the sessions, which were very impressive. Moreover, after the Pope donated a medal to a dozen new members, including a Japanese scholar, amongst these new members there were three or four Nobel Prize winners.

In the last two years, the seminars that have attracted me included seminars on: Islam, human rights, Darwinism, health care for children, Eugenics, etc..

In short, the Holy See has a system whereby the Pope has access to the advice from illustrious intellectuals and scientists of the world. This further enriches the Pope’s messages and enhances his moral powers.

In this sense, the Holy See is not just a mere State, but it is also a network of think-tanks which have connections with many other prominent think-tanks of the world. Besides the Holy See functions as a forum for intellectuals offering them opportunities to raise discussions and arguments amongst them.

A problem, in this respect, should be pointed out, especially considering an Asian perspective. That is to say that many seminars take place only in Italian, not often in English. This may discourage some Asian diplomats to attend. Otherwise, many of these seminars would turn out to be more attractive.

FACTOR 4: POWER OF INFORMATION

Since the Catholic Church covers almost all corners of the World as a universal Church, and Catholic priests and sisters can be found almost everywhere, the Catholic Church as a whole, and the Holy See as its centre, are said to be aware about important occurrences of the world.

Many ambassadors assigned here say that the post here is the ‘listening post’. For instance, the United States established diplomatic relation with the Holy See only in 1984. Not in 1884! However, around mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, a significant debate took place in Washington about whether or not should official relations were to be established with the Holy See. Defenders of the cause argued that if one attended receptions every night within the Vatican walls, one could be aware of the European situation. The majority of Protestants were, however, very reluctant

with the idea of pursuing such proposal. It took other 130 years before the official relations were established.

In Japan there were also similar circumstances to the ones just mentioned above. In 1919 after the Holy See had sent her envoy to Tokyo just for religious purposes, discussions started about whether or not open diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Defenders of the cause argued that it would be worthy because the Holy See's fame was a valuable source of information. But religious leaders of Buddhism and Shintoism were against the idea. It took another 23 years before the diplomatic relations were finally set up.

While the Holy See has 'enormous ears' it does not guarantee you, however, access to its knowledge. The Holy See's diplomats are, as many ambassadors, depict, tranquil, discreet, prudent but also very cautious. It needs skill to let them tell you something substantial.

Anyhow, these are additional elements which maintain the Holy See's international stature high.

## **Final words**

I just presented four factors – non-religious factors though – which define the Holy See's high international stature. Once an occidental ambassador observed: «In terms of size, the Holy See is as small as Monaco, but in terms of influence she is as big as China». Another ambassador depicted her as the «smallest big power». Considering this perspective, those Asian countries that do not have diplomatic relations with her or those who do not assign their resident ambassadors here are suggested to consider the merits of moving ahead, irrespective of the religious and cultural distances with the Holy See.

One could argue that setting aside the Holy See's religious elements is too artificial. I believe, however, that my approach could have some relevance, in a sense that by doing so, I can demonstrate that the Holy See is not just the headquarters of Catholicism, but as an important diplomatic player, worthy to be associated with Asian countries.

In short, the Holy See's high international stature is "a reality of today". So far, many Asian countries appear to have overlooked or underestimated such reality. They are advised to look at such reality in a more direct manner.

A similar affirmation may be made about the Holy See. The high international status of many Asian countries is also a reality of today which the Holy See seems to have underestimated so far. Maybe because the Holy See still remains to be rather Euro-centric, even though she defines herself as universal. A small representation of Asian diplomats here might be partially the outcome of a modest attention (I mean a diplomatic attention) that the Holy See has so far dedicated to the region. The symbolic instance is that there are no ambassadors here from New Delhi nor from Beijing, in many other international forums Asians have a larger presence.

In this regard, it's very commendable and auspicious that the Holy See took the initiative to invite Asian diplomats in order to improve dialogue with them. The Holy See is encouraged to do more and to promote and stimulate the interests of Asians towards the Holy See. But how?

In this respect, there are two key spheres, I believe, where the Holy See could carry out a deeper approach, thereby engendering more interests with Asians towards the Holy See.

The first key element to best understand Asian mentality is to study various languages and cultures of the continent, as Alessandro Valignano, a Jesuit missionary from Chieti, Italy, did in Japan over four centuries ago.

The second is, as a minimum requirement to shift the priority of languages used here in Rome from Italian to English, at least on international grounds. Heavy reliance on Italian would discourage Asian diplomats' access to the Holy See, while higher reliance on English would facilitate their access thereto.

After all, without having more substantial relations with Asia, the Holy See cannot truly define herself as universal.

Having said that, I don't mean to put such an onus only on the Holy See, Asian initiatives are indispensable, too. In any case, there should be a symmetry of initiatives. After all, the relations could be made deeper and larger only when both sides should decide to empower and enhance their relationship.

Before ending my speech, I would like to add as an annotation that I omitted: the reference to the inter-religious dialogue carried out by the Holy See and by other Catholic institutions, which are *per se* valuable, because, in order to make a simple and comprehensible model out of the Holy See, I thought it reasonable to exclude religious elements, focusing only on the non-religious aspects.