Foreign & Commonwealth Office (UK)

Holy See: The challenge of Pope Francis: A diplomatic perspective

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Ladies and Gentleman,

May I begin by thanking the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, and its Dean and Director, Professor Paul Murray, for the invitation to deliver this year's Bishop Dunn Memorial Lecture here at Ushaw College.

My principal subject this evening is, of course, Pope Francis, and it seems rather appropriate to be making a connection in this place between the late and much loved Bishop Kevin Dunn and the current Pope. It is well known that His Holiness has as his motto a citation from St Bede, and I think it right to be reminded of that at this event here, under the aegis of the Centre for Catholic Studies, which Bishop Kevin was so instrumental in establishing alongside the Bede Chair in Catholic Theology. When I read the eulogy pronounced at his funeral by Vincent Nichols, I came across phrases like "a big family man", with "an energy and zeal for the faith", "a much loved bishop" with "a marvelous ability to set people at ease". Pope Francis has spoken a great deal of the importance of pastoral energy in a bishop, and I suspect he would have approved wholeheartedly of Bishop Kevin, known by some as "the Smiling Bishop", for his outreach, his parish work, and his community engagement.

The year of Bishop Kevin's death, 2008, was also the year of celebration of the bicentenary of the opening of Ushaw College. As it happens, just last week I attended a Mass in the Vatican grottoes under St Peter's Basilica in commemoration of 150 years since the birth of one of Ushaw's most distinguished alumni, the future Cardinal Secretary of State of Pope Pius X, Rafael Merry del Val.

On that first day in 1808, 52 students gathered to form the new College. Its motto – 'Esto perpetua – Be Steadfast' – seems about right when one considers the diary entries of one 19th century student on a cold, dark, January morning: "6.30am, Mass. Then breakfast. Latin irregular verbs at 9 am, a cross country run over a rainswept, frozen landscape at 2 pm." Mens sana in corpore sano indeed! Until the 1960s, the position of each student in the all-important Latin examinations was announced in public in the Hall. "As the name of each student was announced, starting with the first", I read in the bicentenary history, "he returned to his seat leaving his less successful colleagues waiting anxiously to hear their fate, until the last youth made his embarrassed way back to his place, often to the sympathetic murmurs of

the College". Well, not Latin examinations this evening, I am glad to say, but a few sympathetic murmurs would certainly not go amiss….

Ladies and gentleman, this is a challenging Pontificate. From his election in March 2013, Pope Francis has asked questions. He has asked them of the Church, he has asked them of world leaders and the society in which we live, and he has asked them of himself. It is neither my place nor my purpose to discuss the questions Pope Francis is asking specifically of the Church and the Roman Curia that serves it, other than to say that, at least from my own vantage point in Rome, his inquiring gaze is profound, unsettling and, yes, challenging for those on whom it rests. This is what you might, perhaps, expect from someone formed through the discipline of Ignatian spirituality. But it also clear that he has no intention of restricting his gaze solely towards his own house. This is the Pope from the other side of the world, and he takes his role as a universal pastor very seriously indeed – "what matters to the Holy See: the good of every person upon this earth!", he told diplomats in his first year. That should make us pay attention. It was a statement of intent.

I want to talk this evening about the threefold challenge – political, economic and moral – that Pope Francis is setting the world, through the prism of his trinity of priorities - guaranteeing peace, tackling poverty, and protecting the planet - that he expects governments, like the one I represent, to uphold. There is no mystery about these challenges. Pope Francis has been clear from the start about his priorities. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, his messages on political, social and economic issues were both consistent and clear, translated to a wider stage through the Concluding Document from the 2007 Aparecida Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, over which he presided. It is no exaggeration to call that the programmatic blueprint for this Pontificate. And it is all there again to read in the 2013 Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, drawn up personally by the Pope shortly after his election, to which fundamental text I shall return more than once this evening.

In fact, he set out his global programme in his very first week as Pope, the key being the short Papal address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See on 22 March 2013, when he sought to "reach out to every one of your fellow citizens, with their joys, their troubles, their expectations, their desires". Think about that for a moment. "Every one of your fellow citizens". Does any other world leader reach out to the people of the world in quite the same way? On that occasion, in the magnificence of the Sala Regia in the Apostolic Palace, Pope Francis flung his gauntlet at our feet, establishing "the reference points for a journey that I want to invite each of the countries here represented to take up", in order "to express the Pope's embrace of the world".

The Political Challenge – Guaranteeing Peace

Peace is one of those reference points. 'Pope calls for peace' is hardly news, but what is challenging for governments is that Pope Francis is uninterested in peace in the abstract. He

addresses it head on, in all its broken reality, be it in Ukraine, the Middle East, or sub-Saharan Africa. Peace is not, for him, the ideal consequence of dialogue and good relations between the powers of the earth, but an essential pre-condition. Nor is he so concerned about the process by which peace is achieved – “the message of peace is not about a negotiated settlement”, he has written – but about the reconciliation and unity that must flow from true peace. In Evangelii Gaudium, in a chapter headed “The Common Good and Peace in Society”, Pope Francis set out his four principles of peace “out of the conviction that their application can be a genuine path to peace within each nation and in the entire world”. They are: time is greater than space; unity prevails over conflict; realities are more important than ideas; the whole is greater than the part. Peace, he reminded us, is the responsibility of states, and he used the word no less than thirteen times when he gave his annual address to the diplomatic corps in January this year.

All Popes speak of peace, you will say. “It is peace, peace, that has to guide the destiny of the nations of all mankind”, were Paul VI’s famous words when he addressed the United Nations on 4 October 1965. Where Pope Francis goes a step further is by being prepared to take risks to set about achieving the peace that eludes the governmental leaders with the prime responsibility of guaranteeing it.

For example, some of you may have participated in the day of fasting and ‘prayer for peace in Syria, the Middle East and the world’ that Pope Francis proclaimed for 7 September 2013. You will remember the context. There had been a terrible chemical weapons attack on civilians and children in a district of Damascus, almost certainly perpetrated by the Assad regime, breaking all norms of civilised behaviour and international law. The crime had crossed one of President Obama’s ‘red lines’. Western countries were considering how they should respond, with the possibility of air strikes being mooted. The Pope’s Angelus message in which he invited people in Rome and across the world – “fellow Christians, followers of other religions, and all men of good will” – to participate in the day of prayer was his third appeal for peace in Syria in a week.

The impact of the day of prayer was extraordinarily powerful. I remember Italian television covering it live. Muslim leaders in the region responded positively. Catholic politicians in particular, in this country and elsewhere, were clearly and deeply moved, as we saw in the interventions in Parliament at Westminster in subsequent days. The Pope followed up by writing to President Putin, as the Chair of the G20 group then meeting in Moscow, to urge world leaders to lay aside differences and “to renew commitment to a peaceful solution”. It is no coincidence, I think, that President Putin visited Pope Francis the following November chiefly to discuss the situation in the Middle East; nor that Secretary of State Kerry did the same in early January 2014; nor indeed that the Holy See was invited to the Geneva II talks that began later that month.

Last year saw several further examples of taking risks for peace, addressing in a concrete way ancient conflicts that have surpassed the efforts of decades of leaders to solve. In June 2014, Pope Francis unexpectedly followed up his visit to the Holy Land with an invitation to President Abbas of Palestine and President Peres of Israel to come to the Vatican and pray together. The Pope characterized the moment of prayer as one of “extraordinary intensity… for the sake of ending violence and reaching a solution which can enable Palestinians and Israelis alike to live at last in peace”. There was something amazing, and rather beautiful, about seeing Pope and Ecumenical Patriarch, Rabbis and Imams, Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders from Palestine and Israel gathering together on a beautiful afternoon in the Vatican gardens to do something as simple as pray together. The hawks scoffed. The cynics laughed, especially when Gaza exploded into conflict just a short while afterwards. And yet, just for a moment, Pope Francis had provided hope, with a simple gesture, urging reconciliation and challenging world leaders to respond.

A magnificent failure – at least in geo-political terms, though we should not forget that the failure was that of the leaders of Palestine and Israel, not the Pope’s. But it was followed by a dramatic success. In December last year, shortly before Christmas, we awoke to the news that the United States and Cuba had decided to start to talk about re-establishing diplomatic relations after half a century of enmity. When both President Obama and Raul Castro made a point of thanking Pope Francis for his help, even the cynics paid attention. In a way, the circumstances of the Cuban ‘frozen conflict’ were made for Pope Francis. A Latin American, close to Cardinal Ortega of Havana, and advised by a team of experts with direct Cuban experience, the Pope could bring to the problem insights and connections unavailable to his predecessors. Obama and Raul Castro, the first publicly committed to improving ties, the second sensing an opportunity and desperate to kick-start the moribund Cuban economy, were ready to talk. Add a bold Papal shove to push the doors open, and the script for the beginning of the end of the 55 year Cuban-US soap opera was complete. As the US Ambassador to the Holy See told me after the event, the agreement wasn’t “made in the Vatican”. But without the Holy See, the pencil draft of the joint text would never have been inked in.

In Evangelii Gaudium, Pope Francis wrote: “we need … to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historic events”. There are some real question marks in his approach. Pope Francis has sometimes appeared to question the legitimacy of international intervention in a crisis, even for humanitarian purposes, if not led by the United Nations. Where does that leave us with ISIL, Syria, or Ukraine? What does that mean for local bishops, like Chaldean Catholics in Iraq, or Greek Catholics in Ukraine, whose bishops have told me during their visits to Rome that they want to see more Western intervention, not less, in their war-torn countries – indeed, there has been some fairly direct criticism of the Holy See from Ukrainian Catholics in recent days? But his constant challenge

to international actors, to strain every creative sinew on behalf of peace and dialogue before the recourse to arms, is a legitimate one, especially from a neutral entity. The Holy See's role in the US-Cuba rapprochement and the Abbas-Peres prayer meeting were, if you like, Evangelii Gaudium in action. Pope Francis, the Pontifex, was building the bridge and challenging others to walk across it.

The Economic Challenge – Tackling Poverty

If Pope Francis takes risks with his political challenge of peace, he sets blood pressures rising with his economic challenge to states to do more to tackle poverty.

The paragraphs of Evangelii Gaudium that look at economic questions have generated a sharp reaction from some quarters. 'The Pope is a Marxist', they say. 'He doesn't understand markets'. 'He wants Socialist solutions to economic problems'. 'He is more interested in wealth distribution than wealth creation'. The Pope even includes a citation from St John Chrysostom which, on the face of it, could be considered inflammatory: "Not to share one's wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own good which we hold, but theirs". It apparently had some wealthy donors to the Church, especially in the United States, reaching for their smelling salts. But in case anyone thought that the first Latin American Pope had it in especially for the United States, it was Italian business leaders gathered in Milan last month who were told: "the root of all evils is inequality."

Actually, of course, as Pope Francis has explained more than once, he has no interest in economic theories – neither the "economics", nor the "theories". His concerns are rooted in people, and his focus is social justice. "Realities are greater than ideas" is a simple principle, but one that we forget much too easily, and sits badly with his intellectual critics. For the Pope, there is no reality more important than "the primacy of the human person", living in "human dignity". It is no surprise that one of his favourite parables is the Good Samaritan, designed by Jesus to shock, provoke and challenge back in the first century, and difficult for many of us still today. "Do you help the poor?" asks Pope Francis. "And when you give money to the homeless person, do you hold his hand"?

He said all this both concretely, and pungently, in a speech he gave last autumn to a gathering in the Vatican of representatives of social movements: the cartoneros of Buenos Aires who make a living collecting useful items from the rubbish tip; representatives of indigenous groups from Australian aborigines to Paraguayan Guarani; and trades union leaders. "It's strange", he told this heterodox gathering, "but for some … the Pope is a Communist. They don't understand that love of the poor is at the heart of the Gospel. Land, a home, work (or, more euphoniously in the original Spanish, "tierra, techo y trabajo"), that is what you are struggling for, and are sacred rights. To demand that is not strange at all, it is simply the Social Doctrine of the Church".

Cardinal Bergoglio, as Archbishop of Buenos Aires, made it his mission to reach out to the villas miseria – the slums and shantytowns of the city - not simply to engage in charity, but to listen to what their inhabitants had to say. We are informed in one biography of Jorge Maria Bergoglio that as a youngster he told fellow workers at a chemical laboratory: “I’m going to be a priest. But I’m not going to be a priest in a basilica. I’m going to be a Jesuit, because I want to go out to the neighbourhoods, to the villas, to be with the people”. From that experience flow the three key messages at the heart of the passages in Evangelii Gaudium that set out the core of his social and economic teaching, called “Some Challenges of Today’s World”. First, he writes, we should always remember that economic systems are not sacred, but instruments to an end; second, that their only legitimate object can be a “real concern for human beings”; and third, that without ethics and responsibility, market capitalism – indeed, any economic system – is unbalanced and potentially tyrannical.

This is powerful, but – to be frank - it is hardly original. Have we already forgotten Pope Benedict’s encyclical Caritas in Veritate?:

“While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human … A prosperous society, highly developed in material terms but weighing heavily on the soul, is not of itself conducive to authentic development”.

What Pope Francis does, though, is carry this teaching into the public space, using media friendly language, and repeating his message – he is certainly not afraid of saying the same thing again and again - until it sinks in. He wants answers, and is not going to be fobbed off. With his dislike of the abstract and the ideological, his words are addressed, directly, to specific audiences. Evangelii Gaudium is addressed to the people that make up the Church, not the institution – it is to “the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful”. It is not teaching that should remain on the page, but should become “the proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world”. And he makes clear in the “some challenges of Today’s World” section that his advice is also directed at “financial experts and political leaders”. “I urge them”, he writes, “to face this challenge with determination and an eye to the future”. “I exhort you”, he adds, “to generous solidarity and to the return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favours human beings”.

As a diplomat, that is something that requires me to listen. The Pope is talking to me, and my government, too. And the Holy See global network, to which my embassy is accredited and which it is my job to interpret to Whitehall, is clearly responding in a very concrete ways. For example, in 2013, the Caritas Internationalis network of 164 Catholic charities worldwide launched its first ever global campaign, with the full support of the Pope, on the Right to Food, promoting the work of small farmers in developing countries, and arguing for more intelligent solutions to hunger in the world and the “culture of waste” condemned by the Pope. More recently, at the January 2014 edition of the World Economic Forum, Cardinal Turkson

was invited to deliver a message from the Pope, helping the world's most powerful business people to understand that Pope Francis is not anti-business, but against morality-free business. "Business is … a noble vocation", read the message, citing Evangelii Gaudium, but "the growth of equality demands something more than economic growth".

But governments have to read him properly. Critics who argue that he is not an expert economist and should not venture into such territory rather miss the point, as do those who like to judge him through the prism of traditional left-right political paradigms. I see Pope Francis as no more a standard bearer for socialism than he is for capitalism – I would hazard a guess that he has great personal distaste for all "-isms", and he certainly decries ideologies. He has attacked "ideologies that defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace". But he has also said that "Marxist ideology is wrong". When he talks about the 'globalization of indifference', he means indifference to poverty, suffering, violence, corruption, war, indifference to all those things that make human life – the constant object of his attention – miserable. However that misery is caused. In that sense, his challenge to governments is constant.

And the Pope's impact and energy is something that governments can also work with. David Cameron wrote to Pope Francis in June 2013 before hosting the Lough Erne G8 Summit precisely because he identified the Pope as someone with bold and imaginative ideas about the world economy. As we look ahead towards the UN negotiations on the post-2015 sustainable development goals, it's good to know that there is a world leader out there demanding action on corruption, transparency and responsibility, "the ethical validity …of economic thought and action". And it's valuable to be reminded, as the Pope did to the Prime Minister in his reply, of "the primary importance of putting humanity, every single man and woman, at the centre of all political and economic activity, both nationally and internationally, because man is the truest and deepest resource for politics and economics, as well as their ultimate end". In that context, it is perhaps no surprise that the Prime Minister's envoy for the post-2015 negotiations has been to the Holy See twice in the last year or so. Just last week, I was in the Secretariat of State talking about how Britain and the Holy See might work together more closely in the inter-governmental negotiations leading up to the September UN Summit on the issue.

If you are interested in global economics and development, keep an eye and ear

out for Pope Francis. When the government leaders come together in New York to establish the post-2015 international development framework, it is no coincidence that Pope Francis will be in New York himself. He wants to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the United Nations and to address the UN General Assembly, 50 years since the ground-breaking speech in the same place by his predecessor, Pope Paul VI. His speech will be pivotal. He will not give technical solutions. But he will remind us of realities. He will not tell us how to meet the goals we are setting ourselves to rid the world of absolute poverty, to ensure that "no one is left

behind” as the world develops. But he will remind us why. He will not give us a new “-ism”. But he will bring to our attention that if we do not structure our world around our common humanity, we are in deep trouble. He will ensure that the moral case is placed on the table alongside the political, economic and technical, reminding us of the human being at the bottom of the pile. And from his global platform he will be challenging us – all of us, industrialized countries and developing ones - if we fail to act.

The Moral Challenge – Protecting the Planet

Which brings us to the third of our trinity of challenges.

“Learn to grow in love for this world of ours”, he told ambassadors on 22 March 2013. “Here too, it helps me to think of the name of Francis, who teaches us profound respect for the whole of creation and the protection of our environment, which all too often, instead of using for the good, we exploit greedily, to one another’s detriment”.

The Pope has been outspoken about aspects of the relationship between man and the planet. His message on World Environment Day on 5 June 2013 was the first time as Pope that he used the now famous phrase “the culture of waste” to describe the systemic imbalance in what he terms human ecology. He talked about the need for “the members of the human family” to be “grounded in our common responsibility for the earth”. Similar messages were delivered in Evangelii Gaudium: “Like St Francis of Assisi”, he writes, “all of us, as Christians, are called to watch over and protect the fragile world in which we live, and all its peoples”. Very shortly, we can expect to see this developed further when the much anticipated Encyclical on man’s relationship to the planet is published. I suspect it will pull few punches. The Pope intends it to make a splash, and the timing in the lead-up to the climate change Conference of Parties in Paris this December is quite deliberate.

In October last year, the Pope’s envoy in New York, the Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See at the United Nations, Archbishop Bernardito Auza – a hand-picked Bergoglio appointment - told the UN General Assembly that “the Holy See believes that climate change is not only an environmental question; it is also a question of justice and a moral imperative”. We may not all agree on the detail, he added, drawing directly on the Pope’s teaching. “But one thing is clear: we have a “moral covenant” with our environment, whereby all countries and everyone must commit to work together towards making it a healthy place to live, for the present and for future generations. We are all in it.”. The Pope himself told the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation on 21 November last year that we were faced by “the challenge … of caring for our planet”. He added: “I remember a phrase that I heard from an elderly man many years ago: God always forgives; men forgive at times; but the Earth never forgives. We must care for our sister the Earth, our Mother Earth, so that she does not respond with destruction”.

Pope Benedict, rightly, earned the soubriquet “the Green Pope” for his profound teaching on environmental matters. But listen to the urgency with which Pope Francis addresses the issue, in that same speech to the Social Movements already quoted. “There can be no land, there can be no house, there can be no work if we do not have peace and if we destroy the planet. These are such important issues that the common people and their organisations cannot fail to confront them. They cannot remain only in the hands of political leaders. All the peoples of the earth, all men and women of good will, we must all raise our voices in defence of these two precious gifts: peace and nature”.

As I have shown, Pope Francis does not deal in abstract thought. He is keen to engage governments on realities. Both the British and French government climate change envoys, for example, have been in Rome recently to talk to the Holy See in the lead up to Paris, and Sir David King will return again next week for discussions at senior levels. CAFOD and their partners in the CIDSE alliance and Caritas Internationalis federation are examining how they can best ensure that the message of the Pope’s encyclical letter has direct impact on the Paris talks. What is striking is how Pope Francis sets out the case for action in passionate, concrete, but also principled terms. It is not that we should save the planet because it makes economic sense, he is saying. Nor because it is a finite resource, though it certainly is that. We should do it, he is arguing, because it is right. And not to do so, he warns the world’s political and business leaders, will be catastrophic not just because of the physical implications, but because we will have broken our moral covenant with the planet and with each other. As the world’s leaders and climate change negotiators jostle in Paris in December for advantage and narrowly perceived national interests, it may be the universal, moral message that gets us over the line.

Pope Francis in the Public Square

Given Pope Francis’ huge global impact, governments have to sit up and take notice. This is a Pope who knows he has a platform from which to address a worldwide audience, and intends to use it. That’s the novelty, and the challenge. Here is a world leader setting out moral principles of social and economic behavior that he expects us to take seriously, and will continue to repeat until we do. A leader with over 18 million Twitter followers re-tweeting to 70 million more, who attracts global attention and front page headlines, whom 6 million people turn out to hear on a wet day in Manila. A leader whose challenges are concrete and real. Just the other day, the Wall Street Journal appointed its first ever full time correspondent to the Vatican. If ignoring the Pope’s messages on peace, poverty and the planet is not an option for the Wall Street Journal, it’s probably not an option for government either.

What are you doing, the Pope says, to ensure peace, to tackle poverty, to protect our planet? He asked that of us in his speech to the Holy See diplomatic corps in his very first week as Pope. And he has been asking the same questions ever since.

Does he know what the answer should be? As I have already noted, one thing Holy See diplomats always tell me when we have discussions about climate change, global economic systems or peace negotiations is that the Holy See is not the place to come to if you want technical answers to your problems. That's the role of secular governments. But in Pope Francis' view the Holy See does exist to challenge, to establish moral principles, and to point the way, on the basis of a philosophy deeply rooted in ethics that derive, above all, from the Gospel. The message is not designed to be a comfortable one for governments to hear. But it is meant to be heard. And I think that Pope Francis is very aware that there is an audience out there that is listening.

The Pope has also not been shy to place inter-religious and ecumenical encounter at the service of global betterment, for want of a better phrase. His ecumenism is one of action – working with the Orthodox to find a route through the labyrinth of the Middle East Peace Process; or with the Anglicans to tackle human trafficking. On his trip to Sri Lanka, he won over hearts and minds by his simple engagement with local Buddhists and Muslims; in Albania, he praised that formerly atheist country on the border of the former Yugoslavia for its success in guaranteeing space and dialogue for all the faiths. Doctrinal experts sometimes worry about his gestures: bowing down for a blessing from the Ecumenical Patriarch, or praying with Protestant evangelists. But they are, in my view, quite consistent with his universal message. Pope Francis fully endorses Cardinal Parolin, the Cardinal Secretary of State's, preference for a bolder, more creative Vatican diplomacy, using all the 'soft power' tools at the Holy See's disposal. Taking risks means accepting that, sometimes, the result will be failure. But if the future of the planet is at stake, can we dare not to take risks on behalf of peace or the poor?

What Pope Francis has done, above all, is turn the debate about the place of religion in the public square on its head. Until recently, it was all about whether there even was a space for religion in secular political, economic and societal debate. In his collection of lectures, Faith in the Public Square, Rowan Williams wrote, perhaps a little resignedly: "If it is true that religious commitment in general, and Christian faith in particular, are not a matter of vague philosophy but of unremitting challenge to what we think we know about human beings and their destiny, there is no reprieve from the task of working out how doctrine impacts on public life". Cardinal Bergoglio, by contrast, was absolutely clear, as he told his friend Rabbi Skorka back in 2010: "We are all Political animals, with a capital P. We are all called to constructive political activity among our people. The preaching of human and religious values has a political consequence. Whether we like it or not, it is there". "Religion", he added, " has to have a healthy power, insofar as it serves the human dimensions for the encounter with God and the fulfillment of the person. There has to be a power that proposes: I help. It is not bad if religion dialogues with political power".

In other words, religion has not only a right but a duty to speak uncomfortable truths to power, and to the powerful. The public square is half empty if it is not there. An Argentine biographer of Bergoglio noted that when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, “the repeated calls of the Cardinal Primate to combat poverty, corruption, lack of security and social inequality generated hurt feelings at the Casa Rosada”, the President’s Palace. “The President protested because he felt the Cardinal did not recognize the merit he believed he deserved for his struggle against poverty”. This is a Pope happier lobbying brickbats than bouquets, especially towards the complacent, the comfortable and the well off. His speech to the European Parliament in Strasbourg last November was a classic of its kind. Some of my European colleagues were rather shocked that the Pope did not shower Europe and its governments with praise for our social welfare systems, our international aid contributions, or our democracies, and instead reminded MEPs how much more work there was to be done. He reminds me of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, readier to welcome the prodigal with open arms than shower praise on the dutiful and rather resentful older brother, who expects to be congratulated for sticking unimaginatively to the rules. That’s another element in the challenge: his preference for creative chaos over ordered tidiness; for spontaneity over formality; for deliberate unpredictability. His style is very much part of his approach to world as much as Church affairs. It leads – yes – to mistakes, but has had an extraordinary and clearly positive impact since his election.

My embassy, and the other 80 or so resident embassies to the Holy See from governments around the world, have never been busier, because there is real interest in and demand for our reporting on the views of Pope Francis and the Holy See on the key issues of the day. I am glad to say that the Holy See welcomes our activist approach to bilateral collaboration on the range of issues I have outlined today, and on many others where our interests coincide or where we have parallel concerns. I often remind people who ask me about the role of the British Embassy to the Holy See of the reasons why we re-established a diplomatic mission, just over 100 years ago (we celebrated the centenary of that occasion last December at St Paul’s outside the Walls, in the presence of a government minister, bishops from all corners of the British Isles, and the Cardinal Secretariat of State). It was because the Pope, Benedict XV, had something to say about the great issues of the day, war and peace, and sought – in the end unsuccessfully – to bring the warring powers of World War I to the negotiating table. Then, as now, the accreditation was to the Holy See, not the Vatican City State. To a world influencing power, not its smallest sovereign territories. The United Kingdom understood then that we needed to be close to that influencing voice. That reality is no different today.

More broadly, Pope Francis sees it as his responsibility to speak over the heads of the powerful to the power-less, to remind them of their rights and what they should expect from government. He is recalling that it is their duty and their right to hold governments to account. Governments and politicians don’t have to agree with him when he talks to them about

peace, poverty and the planet. But it is not a voice they can either ignore or control. He is, in this sense, one of the very few “world” leaders speaking today.

His approach seems to have emboldened churchmen here in the UK as well, be they Catholic or Anglican, as we approach our General Election. They and others have been enthused by a general recognition, articulated recently by the Cardinal Archbishop of Addis Ababa, that “the Vatican is a big voice in the world. It is also not just a voice to make a voice, but is also a moral voice .. the voice of the voiceless”. Morality is not a very fashionable ingredient these days in global politics, but that doesn’t make it any less relevant. That, perhaps, in this globalized and unequal world in which the outsider struggles to be heard, is the ultimate challenge of Pope Francis.

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