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Is There Room for the Papacy in Global History?

On the Vatican Archives and Universalism

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The »global turn« in the past fifteen years of historiography seems to have not affected the study of the history of the Apostolic See. If scholars of the Roman Curia, its ministries, and the activities they took up all over the world, have not explored their topics from a global perspective, global historians have also generally disregarded the role played by the Pope and its delegates in the complex interactions they look for. Of course, there is no lack of literature on cross-cultural contacts and transfers, religious encounters, or trade exchanges on a global scale, which include clergymen and Church institutions (even beyond the missions). But all this is very rarely traced back to the direct impact of the Apostolic See. Does it result from difficulty in sorting out what must be ascribed to the Papacy versus the history of Christianity/Catholicism, or Church history? I will return to this question.

My contribution to this discussion about the Apostolic See and the World will consider first the point of view of those who usually work in the Vatican archives, and secondly that of global historians. Finally, I will make some remarks about future research. My approach is influenced by my interest in the field of the early modern Iberian empires. This might be of some importance here, since they had strong connections with both the Apostolic See and the World, but also because the part the Papacy and Canon law had, in the legal justification of Portuguese and Castilian overseas expansions during the 15th century, led to the first real relationship between Roman Curia and global history.¹ In fact, even though, in the mid-13th century, Pope Innocent IV, a great theorist of the »potestas indirecta in infidelibus«, had sent embassies to the court of the Great Khan, there was no significant relation of the Apostolic See with Eurasian integration, which the Mongols radically accelerated, sparking off the historical process that

would have led to the first global age in World History.²

Scholars who work in the Vatican archives tend to follow what might be called a nation-state approach, however anachronistic it may appear as one goes back in time. This is due not only to the traditionally national-based organization of research, but also to the disposal of many files in the Vatican archives, first of all in the Vatican Secret Archives. It reflects a bilateral view of the interactions of the Roman Curia and its ministries with foreign entities, generally considered in geopolitical terms. Such a pattern replicates the diplomacy-oriented ordering of European archives dating from the early modern period onwards. This is why the conventional image of the history of the Apostolic See and the World is nothing more than an extension of the Papacy and European powers, which have usually been written in keeping with the 19th century model of the history of international relations, something that only today scholars are beginning to challenge.³

The limits of approaches adherent to such an archival disposal are still more evident in the work by scholars who pretend to look at the implantation of Catholicism outside Europe and the resulting controversies solely from the often-parochial perspective of Roman sources. On the contrary, recent historiography stresses the importance of integrating a wider variety of points of view, which facilitate our understanding the nature of imported Catholicism as a local religion.⁴ Of course, this should not erase the process of gradual »Italianization« of the Curia and its ministries from the 16th century onwards (reversed only after the Second Vatican Council), nor that most of the thematic series of documents in the Vatican archives concerns Italian cases.⁵

A major problem for global historians dealing with the Apostolic See is the Papal power's uni-

1 MULDOON (1998).

2 PARKER (2010).

3 It was evident in the international congress »La politica internazionale del papato nella prima età moderna:

spazi e uomini« (11–13 June, 2012), linked to the project »Universalismo e italianità nella politica internazionale del papato in età moderna«, coordinated by Maria Antonietta Visceglia.

4 MENEGON (2009).

5 For instance, the series »Dubia circa sacramenta«, in the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For some remarkable excep-

versalism, an ambivalent legal notion that shifted with the passing of time. After being elaborated within the context of the medieval conflict with the emperor, its contents changed during the »Age of Exploration«: attempts to keep the Iberian expansion under the Pope's control like that by the Dominican Isidoro Isolani (1516), who interpreted the conquests as an extension of the »Empire of the Church« (*imperium Ecclesiae*), were unquestionably dismantled by Francisco de Vitoria's refusal of the »potestas indirecta« as a doctrine that legitimized Portuguese and Spanish overseas dominions (1539). While in the Old World the Papacy continued to play an active role in war and diplomacy, until the establishment of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide (1622), the spreading of Catholicism in Africa, America and Asia was an Iberian affair, and the crowns of Portugal and Spain (unified between 1580 and 1640) were those who transformed Catholicism into a »world religion«. ⁶ The recovery of spiritual authority by the Apostolic See during the 17th and 18th centuries was never complete, nor did it emancipate the Papacy from an obliged collaboration with European powers (now also the French one).

In this period, the paradoxical contradiction between the Roman universalism and the religious and cultural distinction between converts and non-converts intertwined the mestizo societies that were developing under the rule of Catholic European empires all over the world. The contrast with the Islamic world was stark. Once more, the ques-

tion is: how can the Papacy be separated from Catholicism and Catholic Church? One may answer, however, it is hard to suppose a decisive segregationist influence of European secular powers if one compares the cosmopolitanism and religious opening of the Mughal court at the time of Akbar the Great (r. 1556–1605) with that of any Pope in the early modern period.

The 19th century foundation of national Catholic churches outside Europe, especially in Latin America, and the opening of nunciatures in newly independent countries was coherent with the European nation-building process, and it was interrupted only by the contemporary phase of globalization, which began in the second half of the 20th century. Before that, from the 16th to the late 18th centuries, the Papacy was part of a transcultural history that should be analyzed both within and outside the borders of Europe throughout connected history's approach, looking for institutional and material interactions that soon appear when one multiplies sources and perspectives, and gives up research based only upon the Vatican archives. Replacing universalism with global history might help us understand if and how far the Papacy contributed to the integration of the different parts of the world, representing a promising way to revive the history of the Apostolic See.



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tions see BROGGIO/DE CASTELNAU-L'ESTOILE/PIZZORUSSO (2009), and FATTORI (2010).

⁶ GRUZINSKI (2004).