

LUISS 

Research Center  
for European Analysis  
and Policy



EMUNA Brief 12/2026

**NEGOTIATION AND MEDIATION, THE PLACE OF RELIGIONS IN  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS - 3 June 2026**

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President Trump and the Pope, and between Evangelicals and other Protestants**

# **The complex intrareligious relations among Catholics, divided between President Trump and the Pope, and between Evangelicals and other Protestants**

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## **Abstract**

The topic is the Catholic Church's policies and how they arrived at this international context, particularly with America, but also with repercussions in Asia. We must begin with *Rerum Novarum*, and with what the Church was like in 1891, when his predecessor, Leo XIII, compared to the current Leo XIV, wrote this encyclical.

In 1891, the Church had lost the Papal States, which it had held for over a thousand years, and for some twenty years had no longer been one of the major forces in European politics. For over a thousand years, European politics, for better or worse, had hinged on the contradictory, yet highly harmonious, relationship between the Papal States and the Holy Roman Empire, or France as the protector of the Papal States. The end of the Papal States and that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1919, practically 30 years after *Rerum novarum*, marked the end of a period in European history that had shaped the continent.

At that time, not only was the Church extremely weak because it no longer had its traditional political references, but it was besieged by two hostile forces. There was the liberal, capitalist, anti-Catholic movement. Freemasons and liberals were anti-Catholic. Then there were the communists or socialists who were anti-Catholic and atheists. At that moment, with particular intellectual courage, the Pope turned to those whom the Church called the poor, whom he saw as somehow neglected by liberals or misrepresented by socialists and communists. From there, new forms of social and political representation arose, with Catholics gradually establishing themselves in European states, no longer under the direct umbrella of the Church but within political systems appropriate to individual states.

Popular Parties came about. From this experience, essentially, the three founding fathers of Europe were born, all three Catholic and German-speaking: De Gasperi, Schumann, and Adenauer. Schumann, a Frenchman, was Alsatian, Adenauer, of course, German, and De Gasperi, a Trentino native, had begun his political career as a representative of the Popular Party in Vienna. These three men were supported by America in rebuilding a Europe that was to be united and to put aside century-old conflicts.

After the Second World War, the fruits of this Catholic participation in political life matured. It was useful, on the one hand, in halting the Communist advance in Europe and, on the other, in forming the first nucleus of European identity.

The second step toward the Church's new dimension in politics, no longer just European but global, came with Pope Wojtyla. Here too, there was coordination between the Americans who supported Wojtyla and the Church's effort to communicate with the churches in Eastern Europe. This participation was indeed useful because it helped change things in Poland and, shortly thereafter, in the rest of the Soviet world.

But after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Church stalled, that is, it did not find new impetus. There were clashes between the Pope and the American President over the war in Iraq, but ultimately, these clashes were not really important one way or the other. That is, they were important neither for the Church nor for America.

Another step forward for the Church's new identity came with Pope Francis. Pope Francis was the Pope who opened himself to the world; for the first time, a pope spoke not only to Catholics but to the eight billion people of the globe.

It was not a trivial change. He criticized liberal capitalism, and was seen as a kind of icon of sainthood, a sort of Hollywood star. DiCaprio, but also Musk and Zuckerberg, lined up for photo opportunities with the Pope. Francis entered the Asian imagination. Before Francis, the pope did not exist in the Asian mind, he was not understood. No one in Asia knew what Catholics or Protestants were. They were all seen from afar, from under a veil of great confusion.

Instead, Pope Francis succeeded in showing what the Church was, that the Church existed. Indeed, there were complicated, contradictory, but also very interesting relationships with this Pope, who was the first to travel extensively to Asia. Paul VI had traveled to Asia, but Francis visited practically every Asian country except the two largest; he did not go to China or India, for various reasons. The trip to India perhaps should have happened.

Today, Leo XIV is following in Francis's footsteps. That is, we once again have a Pope - it is definitive at this point - who speaks not only to Catholics, but to eight billion people around the world. There are hints in the latest encyclical, which proclaims, among other things, to be in continuity with *Rerum novarum*. In this vein, the Pope once again speaks for the poor, who, in the meantime, are no longer misrepresented, but completely neglected; no one speaks of them anymore. That is, since the end of the Soviet empire, the whole world has stopped talking about the proletariat, the poor, the less fortunate. We have gone from the fact that with *Rerum novarum* there was a crowding of representation - that is, space had to be wrested from the socialists and the Church instead stood as the legitimate representative of the needs of the poor - to today's state of emptiness, meaning that the poor are absolutely forgotten by everyone. However, this empty space is not something simple. On the one hand, it is perhaps easier than in the past, but there are new difficulties, because it seems the poor are of no interest to anyone. So if the Church speaks about it, it is unclear what it is about and what it is supposed to lead to.

Now the world seems hypnotized by the superheroes of tech finance, and in this empty space we have a further contradiction. Namely, whereas after the Second World War, the relationship between the Church and the American empire was very important and strong for both, even though they were separate, today we have no less than two Americans at the pinnacle of global influence. One represents the American state, the other represents a new cubed American dream. It is no longer the American dream, as the dream of becoming an American, but a Catholic dream represented by an American. It is a salvation truly offered to all. There is a representation of the poor that has been neglected. This cubed American Dream arrives at a time when the American empire does not know what to do with the old American Dream, which had instead been America's *raison d'être* for two centuries. Trump today, backed by Trump's broader and more complex MAGA ideology, says, "We must establish priorities in foreign policy and in relations with the states and America. American interests must come first; there must not be this correspondence between the world's interests and American interests." This coincidence, however, was the central tenet of American policy for two centuries.

Therefore we have not only a confrontation between America and the Catholic Church, but in some ways also a confrontation between two Americas. There is a traditional America, with traditional values projected into this world, with the Pope, and a new, strange America, still unsure of how to navigate it. In some ways, both these responses, that of the Catholic Church and that of Trump's America, profoundly represent the crisis of a global system that no longer works. For about 30 years, we have lived under the illusion that we no longer need politics, that the market would take care of everything. Instead, the Church tells us, the world tells us, there are billions of unfortunate people who are the cannon fodder of the new immigration, unrepresented, and abandoned. There is an international system falling apart because America cannot think of everything, and because countries like China, Russia, but also Iran and other smaller nations, are seeking their own space, a horizon that is different from that envisioned by the old order.

Thus, for the first time this new presence of the Church in America is very robust. The representation of American Catholics in the current Trump administration is perhaps the highest in US history. Not even

Catholic presidents like Kennedy or Biden had so many Catholics in their cabinets. Furthermore, for the first time, the Catholic Church truly matters in Trump's policies. We have seen that a stance taken by the Catholic Church and some bishops of the Catholic Church against Trump's plans for Greenland within hours led Trump to overlook the Greenland issue. The issue of immigration, of ICE, was at the center of Rubio's discussions with the Pope. For the first time, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio almost came to Canossa, where he had very long, very private, and therefore delicate and thorny discussions with the Pope. This is the first time in US-Vatican relations that the US government has opened a thorny dialectical dialogue with the Catholic Church, acknowledging its influence in American politics.

These are new horizons, completely new, that are intriguing and also confusing Asia because it is unclear what the Church's power, its influence, actually is. On the other hand, this proves that the Church is a player that must be reckoned with. Moreover, if the Church has managed to influence the American system, then perhaps it can also influence the Chinese system, the Indian system, and the systems of other countries. So how can this be done? These countries, in turn, already have many internal problems; the Catholic Church in most of these countries has little or no influence and the countries certainly do not want to have the added problem of dealing with bishops or a Pope who will perhaps reprimand them. It is a new, very delicate situation, in which everyone is groping.

Furthermore, we are adding complication upon complication. The UN and all international institutions are no longer what they once were, and around the UN we have two great pillars of growth, development, and global order: the World Bank and the IMF, which have been increasingly discredited in recent years. Shawn Mathis says<sup>1</sup> that the problem of the IMF and the World Bank's discredit stems from the fact that they no longer have the authority they once did and that there is a lack of faith in how to measure economies. Why has this happened? It is unclear. But the lack of faith in how to think and calculate economics is a central question. What makes a fair economy? Keeping government debt below 60% of GDP, keeping the budget deficit under 3%, having more or less balanced trade without a large deficit?

All these metrics, these economic measures, are no longer accepted passively. They are debated. Some countries refuse to accept them. After all, if America does not have an acceptable debt-to-GDP ratio, if it overshoots its annual budget, if the trade deficit is growing, why should other countries follow the dictates of the International Monetary Fund? So what does all this tell us? If there is no agreement on the numbers, on the economic calculations, which should be neutral and objective, how can there be agreement on other, more delicate, elements? Thus there is a crisis of fundamental values in which the Church once again emerges as the only bridge, the only thing standing in this global chaos.

We are stuck in a quagmire; there is no clarity. However, a role for the Church on a global level is emerging with ever greater force, one that was absolutely unforeseen and had never existed before in the history of the Church itself, which was confined to Europe, and did not truly encompass the entire world as it does today.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thatremains.com/the-world-that-built-them-is-gone-the-world-bank-the-imf-and-the-crisis-of-technocratic-legitimacy/>

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