



Pietro Parolin

www.ilregno.it - July 2017

After the visit to Belarus (2015) and Ukraine (2016), Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin will go to Moscow at the end of August. The Holy See has therefore confirmed its general attention toward Eastern Europe and the new balances that have emerged after the implosion of the Soviet Union and toward Russia particularly. We saw it in the messages Pope Francis sent to Russian President Vladimir Putin on several occasions and, on the different but not less influential ecumenical level, in the historic meeting between Francis and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, in Havana in 2016.

Your Eminence, how does your trip fit into this course?

"The attention of the Holy See toward Eastern Europe is not an issue of today, it is long-running, and it never went away, not even in the darkest years. It had always considered relations with Eastern Europe and Russia important in different phases of history. It is worth remembering two events that are not very well known but are significant. During his visit to Rome, in 1845, Tsar Nicholas I, Emperor of Russia, had two meetings with Pope Gregory XVI. Two years later he would draw up an agreement with Pope Pius IX. The local Churches stood alongside their people, also in the dramatic moments of the persecutions. It is not just its being at the borders of Europe that makes Eastern Eu-

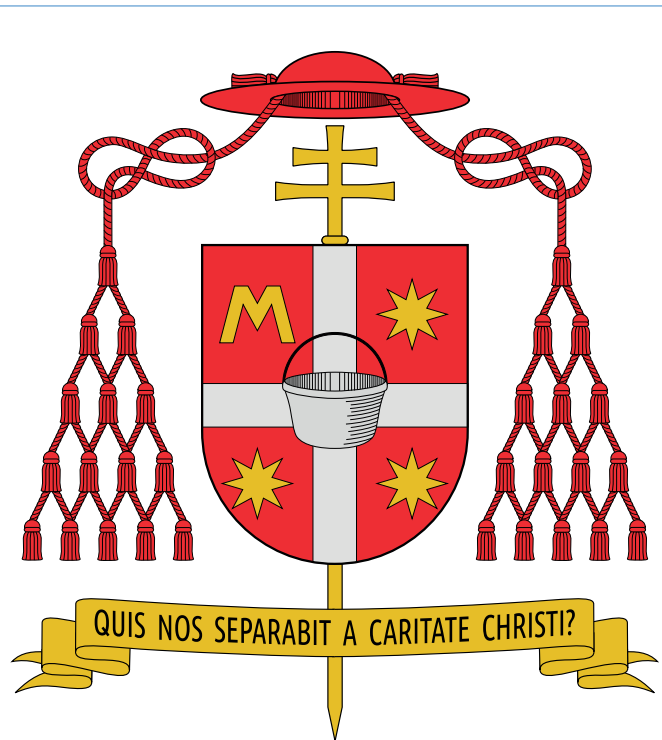
rope important, but also its historic role in terms of civilization, culture and Christian faith. There are those who observe that when John Paul II imagined a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, he was not thinking of "western expansionism" but a more united team of the whole continent".

After the difficult years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, today we are witnessing Mos-

cow's return to the international scene. Every day the differences between Russia and the various Western countries are often underlined, as if they were different worlds, each with their own values, their own interests, a national or transnational pride, and even their own concept of international law to oppose others. In such a context, the challenge is to contribute to a better reciprocal understanding between those who risk presenting themselves as opposite poles. The effort to understand each other does not mean the yielding of one to the position of the other, rather a patient, constructive, frank, and at the same time, respectful dialogue. This is even more important on the questions which are at the origin of current conflicts and on those that risk provoking a further increase in tension. In that sense, the question of peace and search for a solution to the various crises underway should be placed above any national or in any case partisan interest. Here there can be no victors or defeated. Indulging your own specific interests, which is one of the characteristics in this age of return to nationalisms, distracts you from seeing how the possibi-

ty of a catastrophe is not averted on its own. I am convinced that it is part of the Holy See's mission to insist on this aspect".

The radical affirmation of Pope Francis about a "piecemeal World War Three" that the world is immersed in is striking, when you really think about it.



cow's return to the international scene. It is an aggressive return. You need only think of Ukraine and Syria ...

"It is evident that there has been a period of uncertainty around the position of Russia on various themes, but I do not think that you can say that the country, even in the moments of greatest difficulty, ever



ph. Paul Haring



"The international system, after the end of the stand-off between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, has entered into a phase of great uncertainty. A situation that tends towards differentiated multipolarism has been established, due to the simultaneous presence of big, medium and small actors, with interests that are different and conflicting with each other in various ways. This leads for the first time after a long period to a situation of generalized conflict. We are faced with the increasing insecurity of every link, above all cultural, and a dramatic fragmentation. In this geopolitical context, every readjustment is difficult. When Pope Francis brands all the current conflicts as a "piecemeal World War Three", he is describing not only a scenario of violence, but he is also identifying different types of conflict, localized and concurrent: direct wars, proxy wars, civil wars, wars that have just been suspended and postponed. We are talking about conflicts that soon become transnational. If nothing else for the flow of cash and arms that support and feed them. And above all for the tragic consequences: think of the dramatic issue of millions of displaced people and refugees. According to data from the UNHCR from 2016, 86% of asylum seekers

(more than 65 million) are looking for refuge in Third World countries: in the large part, this involves internally displaced people who find asylum in another part of the same country or in bordering countries. Less than 10% try to come to Europe. Among the causes, the pope includes questions of geopolitics and power, racial hatred, and above all economic and financial questions, legal and illegal affairs that proliferate around wars. All of this is often wrapped up with historic, cultural and even religious reasons. On the other hand, the fire of violence and conflicts can be put out only in a global context of order, in justice and the development of people. If in sub-Saharan Africa, in the last 30 years, the number of those who live in absolute poverty has passed from 200 million to 400 million, there can be neither order, nor development, nor peace in these areas and those surrounding it. Dialogue in this case is a shared project of solidarity and development between rich countries and poor countries".

On these conflicts underway, Pope Francis, in front of the U.S. congress (24.9.2015) also condemned the perverse use of religion ...

"Yes, he said that our world is increasingly a place of violent conflict, hatred and brutal atrocities, committed even in the name of God and of religion and then he continued: We know that no religion is immune from forms of individual delusion or ideological extremism. This means that we must be especially attentive to every type of fundamentalism, whether religious or of any other kind. A delicate balance is required to combat violence perpetrated in the name of a religion, an ideology or an economic system, while also safeguarding religious freedom, intellectual freedom and individual freedoms. That is a difficult balance within which the defence of Christian communities and of every community that risks being crushed by hate should be placed".

Does it not seem to you that the visit to the U.S. and Francis' words in front of the congress seem distant, read again now, with the new administration in power?

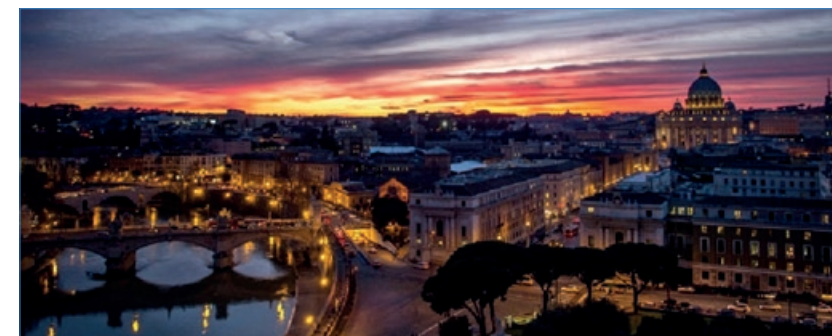
"Time is needed to judge. You cannot be in a rush. A new administration that is so different and unique, and not only for political reasons, compared to the previous ones, will need time to find its own balance.

Any judgement now is hurried, even if sometimes the show of uncertainty itself can surprise. We hope that the United States – and the other actors of the international scene – will not divert from their international responsibility on various themes which up to now has been historically exerted. We are thinking particularly of the new climate challenges: reducing global warming means saving the common home in which we all live and reducing the inequalities and poverty that the warming of the planet continues to produce. We are also thinking of ongoing conflicts".

Are you not worried that the Church's concern for peace is expected and seems even rhetorical in the eyes and ears of many, faced with the question of its effectiveness?

"The diplomacy of the Catholic Church is a diplomacy of peace. It does not have power interests: neither political, economic, nor ideological. For this reason, it has greater freedom to represent the reasoning of one side to the other side, and make both aware of the risks that a self-referential vision can entail for all. The visit to Belarus was done at the time of western sanctions and the visit to Ukraine during the war. That visit was the occasion to bring the solidarity of the Church and the pope to all the people involved in the conflict. And so that this was visible to all, we came close to Donbass, full of displaced people, using the instrument of solidarity with victims of violence, without asking for their geographic and political identity. Pope Francis opened the path with the promotion of a big gathering of aid by the European Churches and with a substantial personal contribution. If you defend the human dignity of all and each person, and not against someone, then another path is possible. The Holy See does not seek anything for itself. It is not present here and then there to not lose on any side. Its attempt is one that is humanly difficult but evangelically unavoidable, so that nearby worlds return to dialogue and stop being torn apart, by hate even before the bombs".

Pope Francis continues in the tradition set down in the twentieth century and reinvigorated under Pope John XXIII: the diplomacy of gestures, signs, and of being close, which considers above all the dignity of the interlocuter.





"We are not just our words, but also our gestures, our concrete actions, above all when words seem ineffective, because they are worn-out or not audible. There is a universalist language implied in gestures: the Church learns every day from announcing the Gospel that it can help, in difficult moments, to stop, and to turn back from a wrong direction. Our perspective can only be that evoked by Isaiah and taken up in the Gospels: In setting 'the oppressed free' and breaking 'every yoke', in sharing 'your food with the hungry' and providing 'the poor wanderer with shelter' and without turning 'away from your own flesh and blood' (Is. 58.6, 7). What counts is healing, liberation, the reconstruction of the human, always starting from concrete situations. For this reason, we have to pose concrete gestures, signs that are at the source of the possibility of living together. Put forth gestures and ask for gestures".

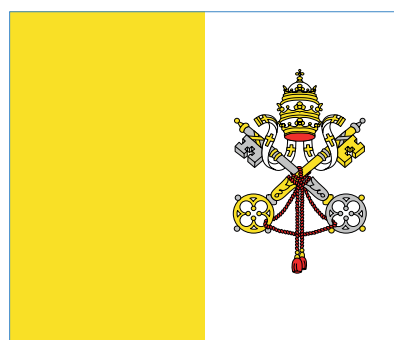
If you look at symbols, at times, even from a political point of view, some emerge that are so full of meaning that they leave space for hope, even coming from sad events. Did it not seem to you, for example, that Helmut Kohl's funeral could be considered the first European funeral of a European leader?

"Kohl had the historic merit of believing in the European ideal as a concrete political ideal. The fall of

the Berlin wall and the reunification of Germany were not a question that was internal to Germany and its tragic history, but the sign of the development of Europe within which a big country like Germany could operate legitimately and effectively. Not a Germanized Europe, but a Europeanized Germany. Kohl had understood that European integration was to some measure a daughter of the politics of the Eastern and Western blocs. And once those blocs were overcome, Europe had to exist as a political subject, not just an economic subject. Today you often get the impression that even the return of the idea of Europe, which seems to be undergoing a sort of recovery, after a long phase of anti-European reaction from public opinion, and the victory in several countries of Europeanist leaders, comes to a halt quite quickly, that it has a brief run which is instrumental more than ideal. The risk is that we stop at the use of Europe in the national context. It is like if many said: after the example of Brexit, it is better to stay within the common European house, hopefully everyone on their own account. Nationalism (the type that is returning and the new forms) has its roots in cultural and religious crises and ends up emptying Europe of its values and reasons. Europe has an irreplaceable responsibility. And when you show yourself to be indifferent, like in the case of immigration, you give up the possible goodness".

Your Eminence, you were previously envoy in Venezuela. What do you feel and think about what is happening?

"Faced with the dramatic scenario that we know, with a high number of losses of human life – already more than 90, above all young people and even minors, and the suffering of the people, lacking in the fundamental goods of life, like food and medicine, I feel immense pain. And I am worried about the lack of prospects for a peaceful and democratic solution to the crisis. The conflict, unfortunately, risks intensifying further in the coming weeks due to the decision of president Maduro to hold a constituent assembly, to draw up a new Magna Carta, something which is facing determined opposition from a large part of the population. Regarding this, on July 10, the bishops' conference sent a letter to the head of state, asking him to go back on his choice. Several countries and international bodies have also expressed themselves in this sense. I believe it is a position that can be shared, because otherwise there is the risk of complicating the crisis underway and stirring up the conflict. I pray to God that, in such tragic predicaments, he inspires in the political authorities of Caracas, and in all the key figures – a lot of wisdom, the capacity to listen to those who just want the best for the Venezuelans, above all the poorest people, and



courage to favour peace and national reconciliation. The Holy Father Francis intervened several times and in different ways to implore the parties involved to draw up a fair, serious and constructive negotiation based on clear conditions and some results already achieved previously, and the Holy See is always willing to help. I strongly hope that the voice of the pope leaves an impression on hearts and minds and really prevents this dear country from falling into the abyss".

Let's turn to the East: from Vietnam to China. Does the Far East have a path of dialogue with the Catholic Church?

"The Far East is such a vast region of the world, complex and diverse. For many centuries that ample part of humanity has come in contact with Christianity, and as a consequence, with the Catholic Church, thanks to paths and forms that vary from country to country. The old cultural and religious contacts with the Asian world (you need only think of those that took place in India in the first Christian periods, or with China through the Silk Road or further, with the great geographical explorations of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries up to Japan and the Philippines) also today offer important cues for meetings between cultures. Certainly, compared to past times, now new challenges have cropped up that call for unprecedented and creative responses, but in the end the aim of the Church has always been the same, and it is by nature pastoral: bring God to man and man to God. Specifically, the Catholic Church asks that it is guaranteed the right to freely profess one's faith for the benefit of everyone and for harmony in society. Catholics wish to live their faith serenely in their respective countries like good citizens, working toward the positive development of the national community. In this framework, I think that the path of dialogue taken up by the governments of some countries of the region should be welcomed, including China. Dialogue in itself is already a positive fact, which opens towards encounter and helps confidence to grow. We face it in a spirit of healthy realism, knowing well that the destiny of humanity is, above all, in the hands of God".

Gianfranco Brunelli