

# The Church of the Periphery and the Catholic Pivot to the Indo-Pacific

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## Abstract

Amid an interminable crisis in the Western world, the Roman Catholic Church's pivot to the Indo-Pacific represents an endeavor to uphold a central social role in a rapidly evolving global landscape. This time, however, the Roman Catholic Church does not harbor imperial ambitions to establish worldly peace. Instead, it aligns itself with the impoverished, marginalized, and those adversely affected by Western-driven globalization. The Church's pivot toward the Indo-Pacific transpired during a post-globalization era. In this era, the Indo-Pacific ceases to be a mere remnant of affluent Western nations; it emerges as a space where a philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural framework for constructing, codifying, comprehending, and experiencing a domain distinct from the West can potentially become predominant. This article will demonstrate how this characterization of the Indo-Pacific could influence the Church's agenda.

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*The future of the Church is in Asia.*

—Pope Francis to the Philippine Cardinal Tagle

The interest in Asia has been an integral aspect of Roman Catholicism's recent history, dating back to the early twentieth century. Anticipating the end of the colonial era, the Roman Catholic Church initiated an extensive endeavor in the 1920s to indigenize the Church in non-European continents. Presently, indigenous bishops oversee local churches worldwide, and non-European bishops lead the universal Church itself. However, Pope Francis' vision of shifting the universal Church's focal point to Asia, as articulated in his discussion with Cardinal Tagle, presents a distinct challenge.

This article explores the convergence of ecclesiastical governance and geopolitics. Catholicism has wielded significant influence in the West for centuries. Nevertheless, the Church's sway in Western societies is waning due to the hypersecularization of these societies and a series of enduring ecclesiastical scandals. The following offers speculation regarding the trajectory of Roman Catholicism in the Indo-Pacific over the next two decades. The demographic prospects of Asia for Catholicism are widely recognized. When coupled with the encroaching hypersecularization that threatens the historical strongholds of the Church in Europe, Asia stands poised to potentially become a preeminent center of Catholicism in the long term. Given the prevalence of Islam in the Middle East and Central Asia,

Asia is synonymous with the Indo-Pacific for Catholicism. Consequently, Pope Francis's pivot to Asia can be more precisely described as a pivot to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>1</sup>

In the forthcoming Catholic order, the gravitational center ideally relocates from Western Europe to the Indo-Pacific. This article elucidates the motivations underpinning the Catholic pivot to the Indo-Pacific and the potential impact of the escalating East–West tensions that concern the Indo-Pacific on the strategy of the universal Roman Catholic Church. The core assumptions behind Pope Francis's geopolitical maneuver are twofold: firstly, an acknowledgment of the prevailing conditions of indifference and injustice entrenched in the daily lives of millions, and their potential for seeking a better existence beyond the confines of Western liberal globalization; secondly, a pivot to the Indo-Pacific as a form of resistance to Western hegemony.

While social justice has constituted a cornerstone of the Church since the late nineteenth century, its consolidated role has perpetually aimed to bring both celestial and earthly peace to the world. The aspiration to foster mundane peace, once an imperial objective reminiscent of the Church's role during the Middle Ages, now necessitates a change. This transformation can be encapsulated as a shift “from the center to the periphery.” The ecclesial revolution initiated by Pope Francis remains integral to Catholicism's ongoing evolution. According to the pontiff, the new center of the Church resides within the periphery, making the periphery the Church's permanent *locus theologicus*.<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis has employed the concept of “periphery” as a metaphor for social, existential, and spiritual marginality since the beginning of his pontificate. The periphery, indeed, represents the place where a beleaguered Church entangled in sexual and financial scandals may find the spiritual resources and vitality needed for self-renewal. By relocating the Church to the margins, the pontiff has also issued a warning to the political and economic core of liberal globalization. Through public declarations and actions, he has underscored his macro-level vision of a central North (or West) and a peripheral South within the context of the prevailing global economic order. Pope Francis has expressed unwavering discomfort with the unchecked and inequitable forces of liberal globalization. Within this framework, he has redefined the center-periphery

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<sup>1</sup> Most of today's Catholics do not live in Europe, or in the global North. By 2050, 75 percent of Catholics will live outside the West. Across Asia, Catholicism continues to be a minority faith. However, Asia's total population is so large that it is now home to one in ten Catholics. By 2050, Asia will be home to two in ten Catholics.

<sup>2</sup> *Locus theologicus* is a Latin term referring to the theological or doctrinal locus, often used in theological discourse to denote a specific point or area within theology where particular beliefs, concepts, or principles are explored and discussed in depth. It serves as a designated focus within theological studies.

dynamic as an economic liberal center juxtaposed with a peripheral religion, one that champions justice and thrives on the peripheries.<sup>3</sup>

The Church no longer plays a neutral role in mediating peace among conflicting parties. It no longer addresses a broad audience, rich and poor, privileged and underprivileged; instead, the Church aligns itself with the reality of alienation, exclusion, and marginalization, standing against the unjust and conformist powers emanating from the liberal epicenter of global finance.

However, in this paper, I do not portray the Indo-Pacific as a mere residue of affluent Western nations but as a domain where a comprehensive philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural framework for constructing, codifying, comprehending, and experiencing a realm distinct from the West could potentially become dominant. The Indo-Pacific is assuming the role of a destined space where a clash between the West and East may unfold. I do not claim that an actual West-East clash—whether military, economic, or political—will occur in the Indo-Pacific. However, I explore this scenario because it remains a possibility and serves as a heuristic tool for understanding the intricacies of the Church's pivot to the Indo-Pacific

The central event underlying the escalating competition between the two is the so-called “decline of the West and rise of the East,” a term subject to various interpretations. In simplified terms, it signifies the waning global power of the West and the ascent of China as the new global power center. An Asian century appears poised to succeed an American century, and the Indo-Pacific serves as the geopolitical arena where this expression undergoes scrutiny.<sup>4</sup> The mounting confrontations between the East and the West in the Indo-Pacific may compel the Church to reevaluate its orientation toward the world's peripheries and its prioritization of justice over peace.

From a theological perspective, peace and justice, if viewed in absolute terms, are not inherent to this world. One might argue that they are defining attributes

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<sup>3</sup> The pope has frequently linked the peripheries to globalization. For example, Pope Francis mentioned the “globalization of indifference” in “Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 105th World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2019” (press release, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, 29 September 2019), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

<sup>4</sup> For a counternarrative, see Michael R. Auslin, *The End of the Asian Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017). The pontiff himself is framing the current East-West confrontation in conflictual terms. Pope Francis's reference to the Third World War, delivered through an address at Redipuglia during a visit to Italy's largest military cemetery on 13 September 2014, reads as follows: “Even today, after the second failure of another world war, perhaps one can speak of a third war, one fought piecemeal, with crimes, massacres, destruction.” Quoted in “Pope Francis Warns on ‘Piecemeal World War III,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 14 September 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/>.

of the divine essence. What humanity can achieve in this world is an approximation of either peace or justice, but not both simultaneously.

Regarding terminology, *globalization* denotes the process of global economic integration, commencing in the 1980s and intensifying in the 1990s with the reintegration of Russia and China into the world economy, culminating in the creation of the European single market in 1992. *Geopolitical* refers to the impact of geography, both human and physical, on politics and international relations. *Periphery* is a term inspired by Cardinal Bergoglio's pre-election statement, urging the Church to venture beyond its boundaries and reach the peripheries, not solely in geographical terms but also in existential peripheries. This article incorporates *geopolitical* to encompass both the ecclesial and geopolitical dimensions of the periphery. Alternative expressions of the same concept include "call to go to the periphery," "Church of the periphery," "orientation toward the periphery," "periphery orientation," and "periphery model."

*The West* is a geopolitical entity coined after World War II, encompassing the United States and its European and Asian allies. Alternatively, the West predominantly signifies specific institutions and values: the social contract, private property, open markets, diversity, pluralism, and freedom of opinion. The terms *hegemonic West* and *East* require clarification. In a preliminary sense, the former signifies a West perceived as the world's center of gravity, framed by Western modes of thought. *The East* can be broadly defined, encompassing a vast region spanning the Indian subcontinent in the South and Asia in the East, with the Indo-Pacific component as its hegemonic locus. It represents a distinct political, legal, cultural, and intellectual reality, autonomous from and an alternative to the West, aspiring to become the principal political, economic, military, and cultural force in shaping the global order.

## **From the Center to the Periphery**

The crisis affecting the spiritual and political authority of the Church necessitates a reconsideration of Catholicism's role in the contemporary world. With diminished political influence and spiritual sway, the Church faces the risk of losing its societal role. While it can no longer strive to bring about world peace, it can, however, work toward reducing injustices. To achieve this, a new Church must replace the old one. Pope Francis has emphasized the need for the Church to shift its perspective from the center to the peripheries, recognizing that viewing reality from the periphery offers a different and more insightful vantage point. As Pope Francis puts

it, “You see reality better from the periphery than from the center.”<sup>5</sup> He contends that Europe, as viewed from Madrid in the sixteenth century, was one perspective, but when Magellan reached the end of the American continent, he saw Europe from a fresh vantage point, leading to a different understanding. This shift in perspective holds the potential for significant implications across multiple levels, encompassing both pastoral and theological considerations.

The theological engagement of the West has played a pivotal role in shaping the concerns, aspirations, and interests of Catholicism throughout the twentieth century. Theologians have engaged with the West from both the center, represented by Rome and Western Catholicism, and the fringes of Catholicism. Western theologians have been instrumental in laying the foundations of Vatican Council II and transforming the relationship between Catholicism and modernity from one of rejection to critical acceptance. However, the reception of the council’s theological tenets has primarily been an internal Western affair. In recent decades, engagement from the center has increasingly intertwined with engagement from the margins. Liberation theology and Asian theologies, while addressing the local realities of Latin America and Asia, have inevitably entered into dialogues with the West and its principal economic and social institutions, including capitalism, colonialism, and globalization.<sup>6</sup> Non-Western theologians have not only challenged the established political and social conditions of the West-dominated world but also the prevailing categories of thought, both theological and nontheological, that marginalize the voices of non-Western populations.

Nevertheless, the theological dimension represents only one facet of Bergoglio’s shift, and it alone is insufficient to fully encapsulate the vision of the Argentinian pope. Pope Francis has undeniably imparted a missionary impetus to the Church. The recently released Apostolic Constitution on the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, restructures the Roman Curia to better serve local churches and the evangelization mission.<sup>7</sup> The constitution is the result of extensive collaborative efforts spanning nine years and draws inspiration from pre-conclave meetings in

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<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis’ 10 March 2015 interview was released to *La Cárcova News*, a popular magazine produced in an Argentine *villa miseria*, or shantytown. “Mensaje del Papa Francisco para la inauguración de la parroquia San Juan Bosco,” *La Cárcova*, 10 March 2015, <https://web.archive.org/>.

<sup>6</sup> *Liberation theologies* constitute a theological stream that prioritizes liberation from social, political, and economic forms of oppression. Asian theologies predominantly operate within a contextual framework, deriving theological reflection from the social environment rather than doctrine.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution of the Roman Curia, *Praedicate Evangelium*, 19 March 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/>. A public statement explained that “With the coming into force of this Apostolic Constitution, the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus* is fully abrogated and replaced, and the reform of the Roman Curia is thus completed.”

2013. “Evangelizing presupposes a desire in the church to come out of herself,” Cardinal Bergoglio had asserted to the cardinals shortly before his election. “The church is called to come out of herself and to go to the peripheries, not only geographically, but also the existential peripheries: the mystery of sin, of pain, of injustice, of ignorance and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents, and of all forms of misery.”<sup>8</sup> Consequently, *periphery* signifies the interplay between geographical and existential realms and also encompasses the Church’s governance, extending beyond mere diplomacy. *Government* denotes an ecclesiastical statecraft, the art of conducting the Church’s affairs. This form of governance should be understood in terms of a sacramental orientation that encompasses both human and providential elements.

This shift in the Church’s missionary orientation is unsurprising, given the harm caused by a self-centered ecclesiastical attitude in recent decades. Members of the Church’s governance, both at central and peripheral levels, have regrettably and eventually criminally resisted acknowledging the end of Christendom and the advantages of a Church conceived as self-referential and self-indulgent. By prioritizing the reform of the Church and redirecting it away from Rome, the Roman Curia, and the broader “center” of Catholicism, Pope Francis seeks to rescue the Church from its own shortcomings and provide it with a renewed purpose.<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis ardently advocates for a Church that is not self-referential.

There is a tension between the center and the periphery. We must get out of ourselves and go toward the periphery. We must avoid the spiritual disease of the Church that can become self-referential: when this happens, the Church itself becomes sick. It’s true that accidents can happen when you go out into the street, as can happen to any man or woman. But if the Church remains closed onto itself, self-referential, it grows old. Between a Church that goes into the street and gets into an accident and a Church that is sick with self-referentiality, I have no doubts in preferring the first.<sup>10</sup>

The Church is called to shift away from its center and steer clear of what Pope Francis has characterized as a “spiritual disease.” A self-centered Church is, in essence, an ailing Church. Pope Bergoglio’s Church embodies peripherality in both

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<sup>8</sup> Jimmy Akin, “The 4-Minute Speech That Got Pope Francis Elected?,” *Catholic Answers*, 23 April 2013, <https://www.catholic.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Francis wants to enhance the potential of episcopal conferences, that is, the local (national and transnational) conferences of bishops, while reducing the power of the Curia.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Tornielli, “Tentazione sudamericana per il primo Papa extraeuropeo,” interview with Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, *La Stampa*, 2 March 2013, <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/>.

a Christological sense and regarding “new forms of poverty and vulnerability, in which we are called to recognize the suffering Christ.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the concept of *periphery* allows for various interpretations. It carries a strong ecclesial connotation: the Church must rejuvenate itself at the ecclesial fringes. As scholar Valentina Napolitano articulates, “a worldwide renewal of Catholicism can be engendered only by placing people who are marginal at the evangelical centre of the Church and by curbing the self-referentiality and thirst for power of the Roman Curia.”<sup>12</sup> However, this concept also conveys a geopolitical significance: the Church must move from the central North (or West) and reposition itself in the peripheral South. Pope Francis’s pivot to the peripheral South constitutes a profound shift in Catholicism’s focus and aims to lay the groundwork for the Church’s future. Francis explicitly stated this in his discourse to the Council of Europe on 25 November 2014: “Creativity, ingenuity and the capacity to rise above and to go beyond her own limits belong to the European soul.”<sup>13</sup> Europe is summoned to transcend itself and extend beyond its own boundaries, in harmony with its heritage and fundamental instincts. However, the pope takes a less optimistic view when assessing the current state of Europe. Consistent with his approach, where “time is greater than space,” he characterizes contemporary Europe as being “more concerned with preserving and dominating spaces than with generating processes of inclusion and change.”<sup>14</sup> The periphery orientation not only challenges

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis, “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (apostolic exhortation, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, 24 November 2013), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

<sup>12</sup> Valentina Napolitano has framed the “globalization of indifference” in an ecclesial context. See “‘The Globalization of Indifference’: On Pope Francis, Migration and Global Acedia,” in *Religion and Morality of the Market*, eds. Daromir Rudnycky and Filippo Osella (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 263–84.

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the European Parliament” (speech, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Strasbourg, France, 25 November 2014), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, “Address to the European Parliament.” The quote “time is greater than space” is from Pope Francis, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*” (bulletin, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, 19 March 2016), <https://press.vatican.va/>. By his own admission, Pope Francis’ ambition is limited to initiate historical process. “God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history,” he clarified. “This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience, waiting.” See Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: Interview with Pope Francis,” *America the Jesuit Review*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.americamagazine.org/>. A more evolved version of the same concept can be found in paragraph 3 of the apostolic exhortation on love in the family, *Amoris Laetitia*: “Since ‘time is greater than space,’ I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. John 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does.”

the notion of a European-centric Church but also of a Church rooted in European origins. Europe is no longer the Church's primary point of reference.

The pontiff's interest distinctly extends beyond the confines of the West, evident in his travels to countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Central African Republic. The center-periphery relationship is applicable at both global and local levels, as both the center and periphery of the world possess their own internal center-periphery structures. Pope Francis visited nations grappling with famine, civil conflict, and human rights violations. In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis indirectly elucidates his perspective: "I think of the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly who are increasingly isolated and abandoned, and many others. Migrants present a particular challenge for me, since I am the pastor of a Church without frontiers, a Church which considers herself mother to all."<sup>15</sup> Thus, the pontiff regards himself as the principal pastor of "a Church without frontiers," a Church that perceives itself as a mother to all, rather than limited to the West. Two significant documents from the pontificate underpin this vision: *Laudato Si*, an encyclical addressing ecological concerns and resistance to the prevailing technological paradigm, and the encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* (All Brothers), which emphasizes interreligious dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

According to the pontiff, the revitalization of the Church hinges on holiness and mission, which signify contemplation and evangelization. Notably, this focus does not revolve around the administration of the Vatican's finances or cozying up to worldly powers.<sup>17</sup> The pontiff's intention is to position justice, and by extension, those who are marginalized, at the core of an internal renewal within the Church. Pope Francis indeed portrays this relationship in ecclesial terms, bridging the gap between the geographical and existential margins of the Church and the historical centrality of Rome's Catholic Curia.

In a recent article, Pasquale Ferrara, who possesses both scholarly and diplomatic backgrounds, delves into Bergoglio's perspective on the universal Church in the context of globalization. Ferrara suggests, "An alternative way to analyze the role of religions consists in considering them as agencies defending the perspective of a universal community, putting into question the *national* political boundaries and

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<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis, "Laudato Si, Encyclical Letter of Care for Our Common Home" (letter, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 24 May 2015), <https://www.vatican.va/>; and Pope Francis, "Fratelli Tutti, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship" (letter, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Assisi, 3 October 2020), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

<sup>17</sup> Pope Francis, "Gaudete et Exsultate" (apostolic exhortation, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 19 March 2018), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

contesting the *existing* global order.”<sup>18</sup> (original emphasis) In his view, Pope Francis envisions a third way that transcends contemporary sovereignties and liberal economic globalization. The pontiff has frequently expressed concerns about conceiving the globalization process as a “sphere,” representing a standardization process that seeks to impose a single (i.e., Western, North American) worldview—a homogeneous vision for society, economics, politics, and culture. In contrast, he advocates for the polyhedron, a multi-sided geometric figure that better preserves multicultural richness. As Pope Francis reflects, “Our image of globalization should not be the sphere,” Pope Francis reflects, “but the polyhedron. It expresses how unity is created while preserving the identities of the peoples, the persons, of the cultures.”<sup>19</sup> Ferrara outlines the idea of the Church that Pope Francis envisions—a Church that is simultaneously universal and peripheral to the Western hegemonic global order. The alignment between the spiritual and political interests of certain Christian blocs, such as the Russian stream of Orthodoxy, serves, at least theoretically, to support this ecumenical strategy of religious containment or even resistance to global powers. Consequently, Pope Francis’s antiglobalization spirit and his pivot of Catholicism toward the peripheral South are two sides of the same strategic coin.

The Church’s borders with Russia and China have become akin to a geopolitical event horizon, and their proximity will shape the future of Catholicism. This marks a significant geopolitical shift. Pope Francis has achieved diplomatic results with Russia and China that eluded his predecessors. While President Boris Yeltsin once invited John Paul to visit Moscow, this invitation was later retracted due to the opposition of Alexius II, the predecessor of the current Patriarch of Moscow, Kirill I. In stark contrast, Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill famously embraced and kissed in February 2016, followed by a joint declaration.<sup>20</sup> Then there’s the Chinese chapter: during the 27 years of Wojtyła’s reign, relations with Beijing worsened, marked by the illegitimate ordination of several bishops by the Chinese Patriotic Church (an arm of the regime). However, under Pope Francis, a 2018 agreement for the appointment of bishops was signed between the Holy See and the Chinese

<sup>18</sup> Pasquale Ferrara, “The Concept of Periphery in Pope Francis’ Discourse: A Religious Alternative to Globalization?” *Religions* 6, no. 1 (2015), 42, <https://doi.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus” (address, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 24 October 2016, <https://www.vatican.va/>). The quote originated during a question-and-answer session.

<sup>20</sup> Meeting of Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill, “Signing of the Joint Declaration,” José Martí International Airport, Havana, Cuba, 12 February 2016.

government.<sup>21</sup> This agreement appeared to chart a path toward future unity for China's Catholics, who had previously been divided into a state-sanctioned hierarchy and an underground church led by Rome-approved bishops.<sup>22</sup>

### **Church of Periphery and West–East Clash**

Pope Francis's periphery model encompasses both ecclesial and geopolitical aspects, primarily as a form of resistance to Western globalism and a pivot toward the Indo-Pacific. The pontiff holds a special affinity for certain places and people. When questioned about the possibility of being the first pope to visit Russia and China, Francis pointed to his heart and remarked, "China and Russia, I have them here. Pray."<sup>23</sup> Notably, Russian President Vladimir Putin is second only to Angela Merkel in the number of visits to the Vatican since 2013. While the pope's extensive *Ostpolitik* and his unique rapport with Putin can be understood within ecumenical contexts, they also underscore the cultural and even visceral gap that separates Pope Francis from the Western world. The pontiff not only departs from the Eurocentric perspective of his immediate predecessors but also maintains a more complex relationship with the other pole of the West, North America.<sup>24</sup>

Some commentators have observed that the differing treatment Francis has reserved for Putin and Donald Trump reveals telling distinctions: during their 2013 meeting in Rome, Putin received praise for his military intervention in Syria, framed as a peace mission. Moreover, in their 2015 meeting, the pope refrained from blaming Putin for the violence in Ukraine. Trump, on the other hand, faced less favorable treatment; he was labeled as "not Christian" during a conversation with the press on the papal aircraft in 2016.<sup>25</sup> The conflict in Ukraine has momentarily shifted Pope Francis's ambitions away from Russia and refocused them on the Indo-Pacific.

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<sup>21</sup> One could argue that the Church's relationship with China highlights the status of Catholics in the Indo-Pacific: a notable religious minority devoid of political influence and occasionally subject to persecution.

<sup>22</sup> The Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China regarding the appointment of Bishops, Beijing, 22 September 2018. In 2020, the parts agreed to prolong the term for another two years through 22 October 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Doug Stanglin, "Pope, Patriarch Meet in Cuba Nearly 1,000 years After Split," *USA Today*, 12 February 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/>.

<sup>24</sup> The literature on the difficult relationship between Pope Francis and North American Catholicism, including sharply expressed criticisms of Pope Francis by certain contemporary conservative Catholics—i.e., R. R. Reno and George Weigel—as well as defenses by liberal Catholics, including Massimo Faggioli and Austen Ivereigh, is extensive. Among the scholarly works focusing on the subject, see James J. Bacik, *Pope Francis and His Critics* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> The remark reads: "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian." See Lindsey Bever, "Pope Francis—not naming names—makes appeal 'not to create walls, but to build bridges'," *Washington Post*, 18 February 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

Nonetheless, the Indo-Pacific may not merely be a repository for the injustices of globalization. It could instead be the fertile ground for a philosophical, legal, political, social, and cultural category that allows for the construction, codification, understanding, and experience of a realm or reality distinct from the West to gain prominence. Within the societies of the Indo-Pacific, marginalization and social disparities may exist and even intensify over time, but the prevailing discourse centers on the call for the emancipation of Asian nations from Western tutelage. What was once a potential East–West tension has become a daily reality for millions of people. The prospect of a local or even regional conflict is contemplated.

This emerging reality of potential conflict between the West and the East impacts Pope Francis's vision of the Church's social role as an advocate for the poor and disadvantaged in at least two ways. Firstly, it complicates Pope Francis's plan by altering the pivot's meaning and politicizing it. It is one thing to move the Church into the land of those marginalized by Western globalization, and another to enter a realm suffused with self-assertiveness and aspirations of global rule. In the Indo-Pacific, emerging powers, unlike the pope, are actively engaged in building armies, inciting conflicts, opening new oil routes, and forming trade agreements that exclude affluent economies. The game is open, and the outcome remains uncertain. As of now, neither the West nor the East appears to be winning this game. A new order, characterized by two competitive blocs of nations vying for global dominance, sheds light on the limitations of the concept of a hegemonic West and the ambiguities of the current situation. It also underscores the extent to which the Russian invasion has disrupted established patterns and made the coordinates of the recent past fragile. The pope's pivot to the Indo-Pacific is no longer devoid of political implications; it is and will continue to be reframed in political terms, with the pope's actions being closely monitored and scrutinized. He will face the choice of either reevaluating his position concerning the old continent, an option that seems foreign to Francis's sensibilities and interests or persisting in his pivot toward the East. However, the war in Ukraine has cast an unwanted spotlight on Pope Francis's Russian connections, raising concerns among Catholics in America and Europe. How can the pope align himself with the autocratic regimes of Russia and the Indo-Pacific while still expecting to be perceived as the religious leader of Western Catholics? The pontiff's room for maneuver has narrowed precisely at a time when the Church appears ready to extend beyond the confines of the Western world, and a clash of civilizations looms, entrapping the pope between two opposing blocs.

The potential clash between the West and East poses a profound challenge to Pope Francis's pivot toward the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the inherent difficulty of striking a delicate balance between real-world diplomacy and the religious

foundation. This situation underscores a second consequence: it redirects the Church's focus toward diplomacy, often overshadowing the theme of the periphery in favor of peace. More specifically, it *accentuates* the ongoing trend of conditioning the periphery orientation to meet the requirements of Vatican diplomacy. Popes are not merely spiritual leaders for over a billion Catholics worldwide; they also serve as diplomats.

The Vatican maintains its own seasoned diplomatic corps, dispersed among Nunciatures, Legations, and traveling Ambassadors. Through this diplomatic corps, the Church oversees Agreements between Church and State worldwide—14 in Africa, 12 in Latin America, 11 in Asia, and 25 in Europe—aimed at facilitating the spread of the Gospel.

As the Vatican City State, the Catholic Church holds a permanent Observer status at the United Nations (UN), a privilege unique among world religions. This status allows active participation in UN Conferences and enables influence over adopted final positions. The Holy See's diplomatic efforts underwent a transformation with the Second Vatican Council. Previously, Vatican diplomacy primarily safeguarded the Catholic Church's freedom within states, often securing privileged conditions for Catholics. However, under Pope Paul VI's leadership, the Church shifted towards advocating religious freedom for all individuals, transcending denominational boundaries.

Diplomacy, in certain instances, carries political ramifications. A notable example is the Helsinki Conference of July–August 1975, where Cardinal Casaroli and Mons. Achille Silvestrini successfully advocated for the affirmation of religious freedom as a cornerstone of human rights. The Helsinki Conference, initially aimed at thawing relations between the two blocs, culminated in a Declaration outlining principles for inter-state relations. This Declaration, included in a Final Act, established a decalogue of international politics. Of significance is the Sixth Commandment: "Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief." This doctrinal and diplomatic achievement, spearheaded by Casaroli and Silvestrini under Pope Paul VI's guidance, played a pivotal role in legitimizing Pope John Paul II's support for Solidarnosc. Despite Eastern countries' initial dismissal of the document's impact, the so-called decalogue ultimately contributed to the erosion of their systems from within.

Back to Pope Francis: in numerous instances, his call to embrace the periphery has clashed with the demands of diplomacy. This diplomatic alignment came at a cost: the Francis-Kirill joint declaration, signed one year after the 2014 Russian military invasion of Ukraine and the de facto annexation of Donbass and Crimea, omitted any clear support for Ukraine. A similar cost was incurred regarding China, with Pope Francis refraining from expressing clear support for the Hong Kong

protesters or condemning China's human rights violations. Even when Pope Francis mentioned the persecuted Uighur population in passing, the Chinese foreign ministry swiftly dismissed his criticism as groundless.<sup>26</sup> And that was it. Many decades ago, the late theologian José Complin cautioned that “even today, popes assign themselves this primordial mission of being the world's peacemakers, an imperial role.”<sup>27</sup> As one of the prominent advocates of liberation theology in Brazil, Complin further asserted, “the popes have learned that their role is primarily political, as promoters of the peace and unity of the human race.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the Church faces a dilemma: prioritize the call to existential and geographic marginalities or the pursuit of peace.<sup>29</sup>

The unresolved relationship between marginality and diplomacy becomes evident during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Ukraine epitomizes the periphery, hosting a dire humanitarian crisis with millions in need, including women, children, and countless civilian casualties. Yet, the instinct to go to Ukraine to deliver the Gospel to those in need collided with diplomatic considerations. Pope Francis expressed a willingness to do anything to initiate negotiations to end the war, but physically going to Ukraine could be construed as taking sides against Putin's enemies, undermining the Holy See's mediation efforts. Consequently, the Catholic Church's

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis' remark reads: “I think often of persecuted peoples: the Rohingya, the poor Uighurs, the Yazidi.” See Pope Francis and Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), xxx. For the Chinese foreign minister's statement, see “China says pope's remarks about 'persecuted' Uighurs are groundless,” *Reuters*, 24 November 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>27</sup> José Complin, “Experiences of Crisis in the History of Christianity,” *Concilium* 41, no. 3 (2005), 103.

<sup>28</sup> Complin, “Experiences of Crisis in the History of Christianity,” 103.

<sup>29</sup> More examples could be added. The joint resolution frustrated and disappointed Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (in communion with the Roman Catholic Church), who said he felt “betrayed by the Vatican” over the declaration's stance regarding Ukraine. At the core of his frustration was the word “conflict,” rather a stronger characterization of the war as a foreign aggression of a neighboring state. Shevchuk charged that the Russian Patriarch “openly supports Russian aggression against Ukraine.” In return, Kirill denounced the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church on various occasions as “divisive.” The pope took the side of Kirill. When the pope received a delegation from the patriarch of Moscow in 2018, he cast such frustration and disappointment in terms of disobedience and put the Ukrainian Greek Catholics to silence. In other words, the realpolitik of ecumenical dialogue must be protected at any cost. Here is the whole remark: “In Moscow—in Russia —there is only one Patriarchate: yours. We will not have another. And when some Catholic faithful, be they lay people, priests or bishops, take up the banner of ‘Uniatism’ which no longer functions, which is over, for me it is also painful. The Churches that are united with Rome must be respected, but ‘Uniatism’ as a road to unity does not work today. Instead, it gives me comfort when I find this: the outstretched hand, the fraternal embrace, thinking together, and walking. Ecumenism is accomplished by walking. Let us walk.” See Agence France-Press, “Ukrainian Greek Catholics ‘betrayed’ by pope-patriarch meeting,” *Hurryyet Daily News*, 14 February 2016, <https://www.hurryyetedailynews.com/>; “Patriarch of Moscow thanks Vatican for ‘balanced position on the crisis in Ukraine’,” *Asia News*, 2 April 2015, <https://www.asianews.it/>; Pope Francis, “Address to the Delegation of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow” (address, Vatican Dicastery for Communication, Rome, 30 May 2018), <https://www.vatican.va/>.

official position was to condemn the war in Ukraine without explicitly naming the aggressor, emphasizing the aggressor's responsibilities while avoiding alignment with the West.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the Church refrained from providing spiritual solace to the people of Ukraine, as diplomatic efforts took precedence.

In conclusion, the Church finds itself entangled in this monumental global shift while on a pilgrimage toward new ecclesial and geopolitical horizons. Pope Francis faces a pivotal choice: rejecting the clash of civilizations and adhering to his call to the periphery, or realistically accepting the clash and working to address it. As Pope Francis once argued, the hermeneutical key to this papacy is that “reality is greater than ideas,” meaning that the evolving situation will compel (or is already compelling) the pontiff to acknowledge the new reality.<sup>31</sup> This change may not necessarily affect the ecclesial dimension of the exodus but will undoubtedly create tensions between the ecclesial and geopolitical dimensions. In fact, the ecclesial periphery no longer neatly aligns with the peripheral South. It is highly probable that a new periphery will emerge at the juncture between the two blocs. The escalating tensions in various regions worldwide, especially in the Indo-Pacific—such as those along the India-China frontier, between China and Taiwan, and between China and the Philippines—indicate that war, rather than justice, is becoming increasingly prominent. Regarding the conflict in Ukraine, Pope Francis endeavored to reassess the doctrine of Just War, rooted in the teachings of Augustine.<sup>32</sup> The West–East clash in the Indo-Pacific will likely compel the Church to prioritize peace over justice, a role it has upheld since the fall of the Roman Empire. In this context, the Church will be called upon to prevent the outbreak of global and nuclear wars and make invaluable contributions to world peace. Precisely at a time when a clash of civilizations is unfolding, the pope may find himself urged to turn his attention back to Rome and the Curia's diplomatic expertise. The divergences between the periphery model and Vatican diplomacy are poised to expand. 🌟

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<sup>30</sup> To his credit, Pope Francis followed a well-established tradition in Vatican diplomacy. John Paul II, who condemned the 2003 war in Iraq, never directly mentioned the United States and its allies in his critiques. A comprehensive resume of the trajectory of Pope Francis' public reaction to the Russia-Ukraine war, from the initial hesitations to the firmer statements, found in Massimo Faggioli, “Putin's War and Pope Francis,” *Commonweal*, 16 March 2022, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/>.

<sup>31</sup> Pope Francis, “Address at the Meeting with Young People” (address, Sports field of Santo Tomás University, Manila, 18 January 2015), *L'Osservatore Romano*, 19–20 January 2015, 7.

<sup>32</sup> In an interview with the Argentinian news station *Télam* in June 2022, Pope Francis said, “I believe it is time to rethink the concept of a ‘just war.’” *Télam*, “Papa Francisco ‘De la crisis no se sale solo. Se sale arriesgando y tomando al otro de la mano,’” YouTube, 20 June 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

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