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«We Need a New Spirit of Helsinki» – The Holy See's Appeals to Helsinki 1975 for Peace in Ukraine in Historical Perspective*

Massimo Faggioli

The role that the Holy See and the papacy of Pope Francis have tried to play since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought back the memory of the Helsinki Accords of 1975. That moment was arguably not just a key passage in the history of international conference diplomacy, but also the highest moment in the history of the Vatican's «Ostpolitik» during the Cold War. An analysis of the recent invocations of Helsinki 1975 by the Vatican helps to understand the importance of that moment and the deeply mutated conditions in the ability of the Holy See to be part of international relations.

The Helsinki Accords of 1975, which saw the Holy See fully involved for the first time in such a meeting since the Congress of Vienna of 1814–1815, were signed in the capital of Finland by thirty-five states, including the US, USSR, and virtually all European nations. The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) had its roots in the superpowers' efforts to ease tensions in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 and played an important role in the strategy of «détente», of easing tensions between the two blocks, beginning in the late 1960s. Among the principles affirmed by the Helsinki Accords of 1975 were respect for the rights over sovereignty, non-recourse to the use of force, peaceful settlement of disputes, inviolability of borders and territorial integrity of states,

* Bibliography for further readings: Agostino Casaroli, *Il martirio della pazienza. La Santa Sede e i paesi comunisti (1963–1989)*, Torino 2000; Jörg Ernesti, *Friedensmacht. Die Vatikanische Aussenpolitik seit 1870*, Freiburg 2022; Alberto Melloni (ed.), *Il filo sottile. L'Ostpolitik vaticana di Agostino Casaroli*, Bologna 2006; Giovanni Barberini, *L'Ostpolitik della Santa Sede. Un dialogo lungo e faticoso*, Bologna 2007; Katharina Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968–1978*. Stuttgart 2000; Giovanni Barberini, *La politica del dialogo. Le Carte Casaroli sull'Ostpolitik vaticana*, Bologna 2008; Peter P. Sarros, *U.S.–Vatican Relations, 1975–1980. A Diplomatic Study*, Notre Dame 2020.

respect for human rights and human freedoms, including religious freedoms, and self-determination of peoples.¹

Few at the time, both in the Vatican and outside, understood what the participation of the Holy See in the Helsinki process meant. Almost everyone was thinking about strategic, political, and economic issues. It is ironic that the Holy See was invited to participate in the conference under pressure from the Soviet Union and countries from the Eastern Bloc.² But that was a major achievement in the policy of diplomatic opening of the Holy See towards the Communist Bloc and of active engagement in international affairs. It was one of the results of the theological and doctrinal turn that took place at the Second Vatican Council for a Catholic Church reconsidering its tradition on ‹just war› in light of the nuclear age, but also a new approach to human rights, democracy, and political modernity.³

The Holy See was one of the protagonists of that meeting, yet in the Vatican, the discussions about the participation of the Holy See were heated. The French Cardinal Jean-Marie Villot, then Vatican Secretary of State (1969–1979), was against it, while the then monsignor and future Secretary of State, Agostino Casaroli (1914–1998, Secretary of State 1979–1990), proponent of the Vatican ‹Ostpolitik›, saw this as an extraordinary opportunity. Paul VI agreed with Casaroli, whom he had appointed secretary of the Vatican Congregation for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs on 29 June 1967.

The Holy See focused on the theme of religious freedom, which no one had thought of. The affirmation of religious liberty – also thanks to the credentials built by the declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* approved by the Second Vatican Council (1965) – challenged all governments that did not protect it, especially with the socialist governments, beyond the Iron Curtain. That formulation had been proposed by the Holy See, through the work of then monsignor, later Cardinal Achille Silvestrini (1923–2019, who had been appointed Undersecretary of the Council for the Public Affairs of Church on 28 July 1973).⁴

¹ See Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act. The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War*, Princeton 2018; Jakub Tyszkiewicz, *Human Rights and Political Dissent in Central Europe. Between the Helsinki Accords and the Fall of the Berlin Wall*, Abingdon Oxon 2022.

² See Nadezhda Beljakova/Thomas Bremer/Katharina Kunter, «Es gibt keinen Gott!» Kirchen und Kommunismus. Eine Konfliktgeschichte, Freiburg i. Br. 2016, 177–185; Katharina Kunter, *Die Kirchen im KSZE-Prozess 1968–1978*, Stuttgart 2000; Alberto Melloni (ed.), *Il filo sottile. L'Ostpolitik vaticana di Agostino Casaroli*, Bologna 2006.

³ See Matthew A. Shadle, *Catholicism and International Affairs since Vatican II*, in: Catherine Clifford/Massimo Faggioli (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, Oxford 2023, 621–637.

⁴ See Roberto Morozzo della Rocca, *Tra Est e Ovest. Agostino Casaroli diplomatico vaticano*, Cinisello B. 2014; Emma Fattorini/Achille Silvestrini, *La diplomazia della speranza*, Brescia 2023, esp. 121–138 about Helsinki 1975.

Cardinal Silvestrini, who passed away in 2019, said: «I remember the emotion with which on March 7, 1973, we presented, within the framework of the principles that were to govern relations between States, a proposal on religious freedom, recalling that in the history of Europe there was a common culture, the Christian one. The Swedish ambassador, who was next to me, exclaimed in surprise (this is a bomb); Ambassador Böck from East Germany asked if freedom of conscience was proposed for everyone, even for atheists.»⁵

Helsinki 1975 during John Paul II and Benedict XVI

Understanding the role of the Accords of 1975 in the history of Vatican diplomacy is important also in light of its comeback of the mentions of Helsinki by Vatican top officials in recent times, and it is relevant also to understand the shifts in the focus of the papacy and the Holy See in international affairs.

The pontificate of John Paul II (1978–2005), a Polish Catholic who understood well since the time of Vatican II the importance of religious liberty and freedom of conscience for the Church's work for peace and its existence behind the Iron Curtain, was not oblivious of the contribution given by the Holy See to the Helsinki Accords. On the eve of the Madrid Conference on European Security and Cooperation, on 1 September 1980, John Paul II sent a personal letter to the heads of state of the nations who signed the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, enclosing a following document wherein he submitted for their consideration and that of their respective governments an extensive reflection on the value and content of freedom of conscience and of religion with special reference to the implementation of the Final Act:

«The Church would like to submit a few special considerations on this theme to the distinguished authorities of the Helsinki Final Act's signatory countries, with a view to encouraging a serious examination of the present situation of this liberty so as to ensure that it is effectively guaranteed everywhere. In doing so, the Church feels she is acting in full accord with the joint commitment contained in the Final Act, namely, (to promote and encourage the effective exercise of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and other liberties and rights, all deriving from the dignity inherent in the human person, and essential for his free and integral development); she thus intends to make use of the criterion acknowledging (the universal im-

⁵ As reported by the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, *L'invenzione della libertà di coscienza*, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 June 2015 (translation mine). About this, see also Massimo Faggioli, *La Santa Sede e le due Germanie nel processo CSCE: dai documenti diplomatici della BDR e della DDR (1969–1974)*, in: Alberto Melloni (ed.), *Il filo sottile* (see note 2), 171–207 and appendix 208–231.

portance of human rights and fundamental liberties, the respect of which is an essential factor of peace, justice, and welfare necessary to the development of friendly relationships and cooperation among them and among all States».»⁶

This view of Helsinki was rooted in John Paul II's idea of the unity of the European continent, and on a positive, activist view of the role of the Catholic Church and the Holy See in international affairs in the context of the Cold War in which the Polish pope adopted policies that differed significantly, in terms of tone towards the Communist regimes, from the ones implemented by Cardinal Casaroli under Paul VI.⁷

This was not the same view of Benedict XVI, who in his almost eight years of pontificate never mentioned the Helsinki Accords of 1975, except once, in his address to the new Finnish Ambassador to the Holy See, on 17 December 2009:

«Your nation has contributed actively to peace-keeping operations and has recently held with distinction the Presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, an agency that owes its origin in 1975 to the Helsinki Final Act, another fruit of your country's active presence on the international stage.»⁸

In that brief address Benedict XVI referred to Finland's role in the Accords of 1975, not the Holy See's.⁹ Helsinki was also absent from the language used by the Holy See to comment on the so-called «Arab Spring», which began between December 2010 and January 2011: the Helsinki Accords were an example of religion's positive contribution to the political peace process in Cold War Europe, while the Arab Spring also represented an attempt to liberate politics from religion in the Middle East.

⁶ See John Paul II, Message on the Value and Content of Freedom of Conscience and of Religion, 14 November 1980, message attached to a personal letter of the pope to the heads of state of the nations who signed the Helsinki Final Act (1975), in: <https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/pont_messages/1980/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19800901_helsinki-act.html> (22 May 2023). See also Religious Freedom and the Helsinki Final Act: Supplement to No. 3 of the Series «The Social Teaching of John Paul II», Vatican City 1981.

⁷ See Michael Sutton, John Paul II's Idea of Europe, in: *Religion, State and Society*, 25/1 (1997), 17–29; Andrea Riccardi, *Giovanni Paolo II Santo. La biografia*, Cinisello B. 2014 (updated edition).

⁸ Benedict XVI, Address to H.E. Mr. Alpo Rusi, New Ambassador of the Republic of Finland to the Holy See, 17 December 2009, in: <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2009/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20091217_ambassador-finland.html> (22 May 2023).

⁹ It was in that same year 2009 that the Holy See and the Russian Federation (then during the presidency of Dmitrij Medvedev and the premiership of Vladimir Putin, 2008–2012) established full diplomatic relations.

Helsinki's Comeback with Pope Francis' Pontificate

Invocations of Helsinki 1975 had come back during Pope Francis' pontificate even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. At a public event in Rome in June 2015 and in an article in *L'Osservatore Romano* on the 24th of June 2015, Francis' Secretary of State (appointed 31 August 2013, and made a cardinal in the consistory on the 22nd of February 2014), Italian Cardinal Pietro Parolin, a diplomat whose vision of the diplomacy of the Holy See follows in the footsteps of Cardinal Casaroli, remembered the fortieth anniversary of Helsinki 1975:

«The Holy See [...] did not escape how authentic political détente was connected to freedom and human rights. If for the Soviets it meant the freezing of the status quo that emerged from the Second World War, for the Westerners it was above all an evolutionary dynamic, aimed at resolving frictions and crises in terms of dialogue and diplomacy, not force. The position of the Holy See approached that of the West. It was the value of peace that prompted the Holy See to participate.»¹⁰

On the 10th of July 2015, the head of the Holy See delegation to Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Monsignor Antoine Camilleri, gave a speech at the informal meeting of the organisation in Helsinki, remembering and praising the 1975 Accords on the fortieth anniversary.¹¹ A few months later, in the 23–24 November 2015 edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, Cardinal Parolin wrote that the Helsinki model is «still valid, even in moments of great tension for the international scenario [...] because it tends to leave to individual states a restricted margin of autonomy.»¹²

In that same year, Archbishop Paul Gallagher (appointed Secretary for Relations with States by Pope Francis on the 8th of November 2014) also spoke about the importance of Helsinki 1975 at the high-level ministerial event on OSCE Peace Operations, held in New York on the 1st of October 2015:

«I also wish to manifest once again the strong support of the Holy See for the process which was set in motion in Helsinki on 1 August 1975 at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and in which the Holy See was an active member from

¹⁰ Pietro Parolin, *L'invenzione della libertà di coscienza* (see note 5).

¹¹ See Statement by Msgr. Antoine Camilleri, Head of the Holy See Delegation, High-Level Informal Meeting of OSCE, Helsinki, 10 July 2015, in: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/2015/documents/rc-seg-st-20150710_osce-helsinki_en.html (22 May 2023).

¹² Pietro Parolin, *Nuove vie per la pace*, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 23–24 November 2015 (translation mine).

the very beginning. The Helsinki Final Act, signed by the nations of Europe, together with Canada and the United States, must be considered as one of the most significant instruments of international dialogue.»¹³

The Holy See and the «New Spirit of Helsinki» after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Mentions of Helsinki 1975 and of the «spirit of Helsinki» have appeared, in a more prominent way, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine beginning on 24 February 2022, which represents a particularly difficult test not just for the role of the Holy See in world affairs, but also for the development of Catholic social teaching on war and peace.¹⁴

The Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, advanced the idea of a new Helsinki conference in a speech delivered at a public event held at the LUMSA University in Rome on 29 April 2022. The occasion of the event was a presentation of the new book, *Contro la guerra. Il coraggio di costruire la pace* (Against War: The Courage to Build Peace), a collection of writings and appeals by Pope Francis.¹⁵ Cardinal Parolin's keynote was based not only on quotation from the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church and the post-World War II Italian Constitution of 1948, but also from key figures in the history of contemporary Italian Catholicism, famous for their engagement in the relationship between Church and democracy: the charismatic mayor of Florence and peace activist Giorgio La Pira and the «street priest» and anti-militarist pedagogue Fr. Lorenzo Milani.¹⁶

Cardinal Parolin, in calling for a recovery of the «spirit» of Helsinki, also remembered the role of Aldo Moro, then Italian Prime Minister (and practising Catholic) who led the Italian delegation and signed the Final Accords of 1975, and his intention to go «beyond the logic of opposing blocs.»¹⁷ He emphasized the importance of international dialogue for a new international order based on

¹³ Intervention of Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, at the High-level ministerial event on Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Peace Operations, 1 October 2015, in: <<https://holyseemission.org/contents//statements/561fc53f10f996.54177991.php>> (22 May 2023).

¹⁴ See Pavlo Smytsnyuk, The Holy See Confronts the War in Ukraine. Between Just War Theory and Nonviolence, in: *ET-Studies*, 14/1 (2023), 3–24.

¹⁵ See Francesco, *Contro la guerra. Il coraggio di costruire la pace*, Milano 2022.

¹⁶ See Salvatore Cernuzio, Cardinal Parolin: War is a sacrilege, we need a new Helsinki Conference, in: <<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-04/cardinal-parolin-pope-book-against-war-presentation-helsinki.html>> (22 May 2023).

¹⁷ Pietro Parolin, Speech at the presentation of Pope Francis' book «Contro la guerra. Il coraggio di costruire la pace» at the LUMSA University in Rome, 29 April 2022, as cited in Salvatore Cernuzio, Cardinal Parolin: War is a sacrilege, we need a new Helsinki Conference, in: <<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-04/cardinal-parolin-pope-book-against-war-presentation-helsinki.html>> (22 May 2023).

peace and security. «During that Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe, East and West joined on the path of détente,» Parolin stated, and he reminded the «role played by the Holy See and the delegation led by the future Cardinal Agostino Casaroli.» «Today we need a new Helsinki Conference»: Parolin emphasized that «the important thing is to return to the spirit» of that Conference, which was «lost too soon». Back then, at the time of the tensions of the Cold War, «there was the wisdom of someone who said «we must stop this drift». And that drift was stopped by bringing together the various protagonists and conceiving a remarkable result that produced so many changes in Europe.»¹⁸

Cardinal Parolin recalled the «spirit of Helsinki» in an appeal to multilateralism, in direct reference to the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

«This war, perhaps no one thought that it would break out, that some ploy would be found. But I have the impression that this war was the obvious consequence of a process of the last decades. The Holy See spoke of the erosion of multilateralism: you could see that the nations and those in charge no longer believed in a common solution to the problems that each sought to solve in their own way, based on the interests of nations and groups. It was logical that the process would lead towards this conclusion and it will continue to lead to similar conclusions if this trend is not put to an end.»¹⁹

In his remarks Cardinal Parolin echoed a strong speech, openly critical of the government of the Russian Federation, delivered by the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella (a practicing Roman Catholic), to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe two days before, on 27 April 2022:

«Helsinki and not Yalta: we want dialogue, not shows of strength between great powers that must realize that are increasingly less great. To envisage an international forum that would renew the roots of peace, that would restore dignity to a framework of security and cooperation, following the example of the Helsinki Conference that led, in 1975, to a Final Act that heralded positive developments. And of which the OSCE was offspring. It is a question of strongly affirming the rejection of a policy based on spheres of influence, on weakened rights for certain peoples and countries, and instead of proclaiming, in the spirit of Helsinki, equal rights and equality for peoples and for people. According to a new architecture of international relations, in Europe and in the world, shared, involving, without prejudicial privileged positions.»²⁰

This effort to bring back the «spirit of Helsinki» came also from Pope Francis himself during his trip to Kazakhstan for the opening and plenary session of the

¹⁸ Pietro Parolin, Speech at the presentation of Pope Francis' book «Contro la guerra. Il coraggio di costruire la pace» at the LUMSA University in Rome, 29 April 2022 (see note 17).

¹⁹ Pietro Parolin, Speech at the presentation of Pope Francis' book «Contro la guerra. Il coraggio di costruire la pace» at the LUMSA University in Rome, 29 April 2022 (see note 17).

²⁰ Sergio Mattarella, Speech at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, 27 April 2022, in: <<https://www.quirinale.it/elementi/67087>> (22 May 2023).

VII Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. In the speech to the authorities, civil society and the diplomatic corps delivered in the capital of Kazakhstan, Nur-Sultan, on 13 September 2022, Pope Francis made explicit reference to the Helsinki Accords of 1975:

«The need to expand the efforts of diplomacy to promote dialogue and encounter thus becomes all the more pressing, since nowadays the problem of one is the problem of all, and those who hold greater power in the world have greater responsibility with regard to others, especially those countries most prone to unrest and conflict. This should be our concern, not merely our own individual interests. Now is the time to stop intensifying rivalries and reinforcing opposing blocs. We need leaders who, on the international level, can enable peoples to grow in mutual understanding and dialogue, and thus give birth to a new «spirit of Helsinki», the determination to strengthen multilateralism, to build a more stable and peaceful world, with an eye to future generations. For this to happen, what is needed is understanding, patience and dialogue with all. I repeat: with all.»²¹

Since September 2022, the posture of the Vatican on the war in Ukraine changed in subtle but important ways. While maintaining the alert on the dangers of nuclear escalation and refusing to join the Western alliance in support of Ukraine aimed at arming the forces fighting the Russian invasion, the Vatican became more critical of Russia and closer to Ukraine, even as Francis attempted to keep a channel of dialogue open with Moscow. Despite this subtle shift in the tone of the Vatican statements on the war since the fall of 2022, the invocations of Helsinki did not disappear, at least until the spring and summer of 2023.

On 1 December 2022, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States within the Holy See's Secretariat of State since November 2014, returned to the topic of Helsinki in light of the war in Ukraine during a speech at the 29th meeting of the ministers of the OSCE in Lodz (Poland). The «minister of foreign affairs» of the Vatican recalled the history and complex era of the Cold War, when «East and West were separated by the radical difference or irreconcilability of their respective systems, both proclaiming their own convictions, their own prophecies; aggressive, or at least aggressively placed on the defensive, driven by a spirit of affirmation and expansion.»²² That wall that seemed insurmountable has instead been overcome: «Our predecessors gathered around a table in Helsinki

²¹ Pope Francis, Meeting with the Authorities, Civil Society and the Diplomatic Corps, Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan), 13 September 2022, in: <<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/september/documents/20220913-kazakhstan-autorita.html>> (22 May 2023).

²² Paul Gallagher, Speech at the 29th meeting of the ministers of the OSCE in Lodz (Poland), 1 December 2022, as cited in Salvatore Cernuzio, Gallagher: il dialogo esige un sacrificio da parte di tutti, non tradire lo spirito di Helsinki, in: <<https://www.vaticannews.va/it/vaticano/news/2022-12/gallagher-intervento-osce-guerra-ucraina-rifugiati-intolleranza.html>> (22 May 2023).

and managed to discuss topics of common interest, accepting and honoring commitments in the service of the common good. The longer the international community delays in responding to its overall responsibilities, the more it loses credibility». Gallagher asked: «How could we betray the spirit of Helsinki?»²³ A betrayal which, the archbishop said, «began long before last February»²⁴, that is, from the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

A few days later, on the 13 of December 2022, the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, repeated his appeal to Helsinki in a speech delivered at the Italian Embassy to the Holy See, during a public event co-organised by Vatican Media and the Italian journal of geopolitics, *Limes*. The references to Helsinki were more realistic and straightforward in the awareness of the distance between 1975 and today:

«Today there are no conditions for a repeat of what happened in Helsinki. But the conditions are there – and if they aren't there, we have to work to make them come true – to revive the spirit of Helsinki by working creatively. We need to face this crisis, this war and the many forgotten wars, with new tools. We cannot read the present and imagine the future only on the basis of old schemes, old military alliances or ideological and economic colonisations [...] The Helsinki Conference, with its important acquisitions, saw the proposition of many ideas coming from pacifist movements. I am certainly aware of the ideological risk present in certain positions then and now, as well as the fact that in the 1970s this involvement took place in a sometimes chaotic and disorganized manner. Precisely for this reason, I take the liberty of suggesting the need for a greater, organized and preordained involvement of European civil society, peace movements, think-tanks and organizations that work at all levels to educate for peace and dialogue.»²⁵

Cardinal Parolin continued:

«Even if the experience of Helsinki appears unrepeatable today in its characteristics and peculiarities, let us try to recover the «spirit of Helsinki», let us re-read the Declaration on the principles guiding the relations between the participating States which was inserted in the Final Act, a decalogue which included: sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty; not resorting to the threat or use of force; inviolability of borders; territorial integrity of states; peaceful resolution of disputes; non-intervention in internal affairs; respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief; equal

²³ Paul Gallagher, Speech at the 29th meeting of the ministers of the OSCE in Lodz (Poland), 1 December 2022 (see note 22).

²⁴ Paul Gallagher, Speech at the 29th meeting of the ministers of the OSCE in Lodz (Poland), 1 December 2022 (see note 22).

²⁵ Pietro Parolin, Dallo spirito di Helsinki alle prospettive di pace, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 December 2022, in: <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2022-12/quo-284/dallo-spirito-di-helsinki-alle-prospettive-di-pace.html> (22 May 2023).

rights and self-determination of peoples; cooperation between states; fulfillment in good faith of obligations under international law.»²⁶

There is a biographical aspect that is important for understanding these attempts to recover the «spirit of Helsinki». These appeals came from Vatican top officials trained, formed, and promoted during the age of Vatican «Ostpolitik» between the 1960s and 1980s – the age of Cardinals Agostino Casaroli (1914–1998) and Achille Silvestrini (1923–2019). It is the school of Vatican diplomacy influenced by Cardinal Domenico Tardini (1888–1961), one of the most influential Vatican diplomats already in the 1930s and during World War II.²⁷ But there is also a theological-political aspect. Helsinki 1975 was the crowning achievement of the policy of openness and «détente» towards the communist regimes of Eastern Europe, which was made possible by the Second Vatican Council as well as by the diplomatic tradition of the Holy See that had reinvented itself after the fall of the Papal State in 1870. Helsinki was the litmus test of a new, recognised centrality and incisiveness of Vatican diplomatic action and the beginning of a more dynamic and proactive phase of Vatican «Ostpolitik» beginning in the 1960s. The «spirit of Helsinki» was, in 2022, the natural point of reference for top policymakers in the Vatican working on the possibilities for the contribution of the diplomacy of the Holy See in the solution of the crisis produced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The Challenges for a «New Spirit of Helsinki» in the 21st Century

After the end of 2022 the hopes for a new «spirit of Helsinki» seem to have abandoned Vatican diplomacy. The invocations of Helsinki did not appear in Pope Francis' speech to national authorities and the diplomatic corps during his trip to Hungary on the 28th of April 2023 – a speech which contained a strong paragraph on the war in Ukraine. Helsinki did not appear either in the most important moment in the Vatican efforts to work for peace in Ukraine, that is, the audience that pope Francis gave to the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, on 13 May 2023, while he was visiting Italy and other European countries in the effort to rally political and military support for the defense of his country. The unceremo-

²⁶ Pietro Parolin, *Dallo spirito di Helsinki alle prospettive di pace*, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13 December 2022, in: <<https://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/2022-12/quo-284/dallo-spirito-di-helsinki-alle-prospettive-di-pace.html>> (22. May 2023).

²⁷ For the relationship between Cardinal Parolin, his predecessor Cardinal Casaroli, and Cardinal Silvestrini, see Pietro Parolin, *Il contributo per il coraggioso impegno della Santa Sede per la pace e i diritti umani universali*, in: Carlo Felice Casula/Pietro Sebastiani (eds.), *Il Cardinale Silvestrini. Dialogo e pace nello spirito di Helsinki*, Città del Vaticano 2023, 17–26.

niously tense audience in the Vatican, after the meeting with Pope Francis, included an exchange with Archbishop Gallagher. The chief Vatican diplomat, the Secretary of State, Cardinal Parolin, was enigmatically absent because in Portugal at the traditional May pilgrimage at the sanctuary of Fatima.

In the official communique of the audience in Vatican of 13 May 2023, the word *«Helsinki»* was not mentioned.²⁸ In the tweets and interviews released in the hours after the audience, the president of Ukraine clearly stated his refusal to talk about peace plans that do not include the liberation of his country from the invasion. President Zelenskyy dismissed the idea of Vatican mediation during an interview with an Italian news program: *«With all due respect for His Holiness, we do not need mediators, we need a just peace»*.

Just a few days later, on 20 May, the Vatican announced the appointment of a special envoy, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi (Archbishop of Bologna, President of the Italian Bishops' conference, and a member of the Rome-based, lay-run Community of Sant'Egidio which had an important role in ending the civil war in Mozambique in 1992) for a *«peace mission»* between Russia and Ukraine. At the same time, it has become evident a widening gap about Ukraine between the Vatican and not just the diplomacies of the alliance supporting Ukraine, but also a gap with a very important interlocutor for Francis' papacy, the President of the Italian Republic, who spoke openly about the right of the Ukrainian people to defend itself and the need of democracies to help Ukraine. This is important to note because the early mention of Helsinki 1975 in the language of the Holy See in 2022 and the appeal to the *«spirit of Helsinki»* echoed similar statements made by the president of the Italian Republic.²⁹

The appeals to Helsinki by Vatican diplomacy in 2022 were an attempt to work for peace in Ukraine and they offer us a few indications on the differences between the context of 1975 and the present predicament of the Holy See and papal diplomacy. The most immediate is that in 1975 the pope was Paul VI, an Italian cleric whose political culture matured in the same geographical and historical

²⁸ Sala Stampa della Santa Sede, Comunicato della Sala Stampa della Santa Sede. Udiienza al Presidente dell'Ucraina, 13 May 2023, in: press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2023/05/13/0368/00799.html (23 May 2023).

²⁹ It is interesting to note that on 23 October 2022, at an event organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio in Rome, the Italian president mentioned the *«spirit of Assisi»* (the interreligious meeting that took place for the first time on 27 October 1986, and convincingly participated by John Paul II) and at the same time also rejected the calls for a negotiated peace in Ukraine that ignored the wishes of Ukrainians for the territorial integrity of their country. See Sergio Mattarella, Speech at the International Meeting *«The Cry for Peace»* in Rome organised by the Community of Sant'Egidio, 23 October 2022, in: <https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/pageID/31533/langID/it/text/3761/Sergio-Mattarella-a-thecryforpeace-LEuropa-non-può-permettersi-di-cadere-prigioniera-della-precarietà-incapace-di-assolvere-al-suo-naturale-ruolo-di-garante-di-pace-e-di-stabilità.html> (23 May 2023).

context in which the rebuilders of post-war Europe had conceived a new unity of the European project in collaboration with the United States as a response to the threat of Communism. In terms of political philosophy and doctrine of the State, Vatican II became, in its own way, part of the Western liberal consensus in limited, but very important ways: the council declared the end of the Catholic theology of monarchic legitimism and of government thanks to divine right; it acknowledged the contribution of modern constitutionalism for the development of an understanding of individual human rights that is compatible with the Gospel.³⁰ Vatican II talked in a positive way, even if indirectly, of the constitutions of the modern state, of the separation of powers, of elections, and of mutual independence between Church and state. In the constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church acknowledged the history of its clash with nationalism and expressed the awareness that the Church had grown in that struggle. Vatican II also articulated a clear rejection of ethno-nationalism and religious nationalism and saw the danger of the nationalist identification of Church with nation or race. Now, it is important to note that Pope Francis comes theologically from Vatican II, but from a very different, geographically and politically, Latin American background; he brings a different, more critical view of the Western liberal order and of the European continent and its relations with both the United States and Russia.³¹ But there are other, more subtle differences.

The first is the key factor of the disappearance in Europe of Christian-Democrat political and intellectual elites able and willing to support the Catholic Church's efforts on the international stage. Their contribution was visible during the Vatican «Ostpolitik» (albeit not without tensions) on both sides of the Iron Curtain.³² In the 21st century it is hard to identify the political elites of Catholics, in Italy as well as in Europe, that are not only willing to cooperate, but also able to interact at an intellectual level with the Holy See's efforts on the international stage. Moreover, those Catholic politicians who are in power or are influential in Europe today (for example, Giorgia Meloni in Italy) are «cultural Catholics» – cultural also in the sense that they have embraced the anti-liberal Catholic agenda in the «culture wars». They have worldviews and dispositions towards international bodies (the EU, the UN) that do not align with the Holy See's in the same

³⁰ See Emile Perreau-Saussine, *Catholicism and Democracy. An Essay in the History of Political Thought*, Princeton 2012; Francis Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300–1870*, New York 2003, esp. 182–216.

³¹ See Massimo Faggioli, *The Liminal Papacy of Pope Francis. Moving toward Global Catholicity*, Maryknoll, New York 2020.

³² See Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union*, Cambridge, (United Kingdom) 2011; Jean-Dominique Durand (ed.), *Christian Democrat Internationalism. Its Action in Europe and Worldwide from post-World War II until the 1990s*, 3 vols., Frankfurt a. M. 2013–2014.

way the political class of Christian-Democrats in the second half of the 20th century did. The kind of Vatican II Catholicism embodied by Italian President Sergio Mattarella is an exception and a dying breed of intellectual and political elites.³³

Secondly, there is the difference between the multilateral state diplomacies in 1975 and today. In the 21st-century disruption of the international order, both state diplomacies and Vatican diplomacy rely on ecclesial-religious networks made of *«believers without borders»*, where the disconnect and tension between religious identity and political loyalties has become even more evident than during the Cold War: coming from a Catholic background, or responding to appeals to Catholics in politics does not longer imply a narrow set of loyalties at the domestic or international level. This is part of a larger shift: from the couple *«diplomacy and ecumenism»* (especially ecumenism between Catholicism and the Orthodox Churches) in the immediate post-Vatican II period, to a very different binomium: fragmentation of ecclesial identities internal to every church or religious tradition and the rise of theo-political civilisational narratives about the role of religion in world affairs. There is an evident problem of representativity of clerical leaders of the Orthodox Churches, but for the Catholic Church the problem is not entirely different, also in light of the fact that the diplomatic efforts of the Holy See now have to deal with Catholic groups and movements that run their own diplomatic initiatives (the Rome-based Community of Sant'Egidio), with varying degrees of coordination with the Vatican Secretariat of State.³⁴ Cardinal Zuppi included in his delegation experts from Sant'Egidio, which is well known by authorities both religious and secular for its *«parallel diplomacy»* initiatives, especially in African countries.³⁵ Pope Francis has given these new channels of diplomacy more prominence compared to his predecessors. Some Vatican experts see this choice as a delegitimisation of papal diplomacy, which in fact has multiple and complex causes. The weakening of the authority of Vatican diplomacy is one of the side effects and

³³ For a comparison with the previous era, see Jacopo Cellini, *Universalism and Liberation. Italian Catholic Culture and the Idea of International Community 1963–1978*, Leuven 2017.

³⁴ See the conference organised in Rome by the Community of Sant'Egidio, October 2022, with participants also from Russia and the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate of Moscow.

³⁵ Rather than *«parallel diplomacy»*, the Community of Sant'Egidio would prefer to speak of *«a synergy of efforts among all levels: institutional and non-institutional, official and from civil society.»* See Community of Sant'Egidio, *The Method of Sant'Egidio*, in: <https://archive.santegidio.org/pageID/670/langID/en/The-Method-of-Sant-Egidio.html> (11 August 2023). See also Victor Gaetan, *God's Diplomats. Pope Francis, Vatican diplomacy, and America's Armageddon*, Lanham (Maryland) 2021, 39–41. For an internal perspective, see Vincenzo Ceruso, *Una rivoluzione cristiana. Breve storia della comunità di sant'Egidio*, Trapani 2020; Roberto Morozzo Della Rocca, *Fare pace. La diplomazia di Sant'Egidio*, Cinisello B. 2017.

the price to pay to the ‹civil society strategy› pursued by the Catholic hierarchy to reconquer lost authority in the public and political spaces.³⁶

Third: the invitation to the Holy See to participate in the Helsinki process was also the result of years (a decade at least) of Vatican ‹Ostpolitik› which gave the Holy See credentials as a respectable interlocutor before the Communist regimes. In the end, the Holy See participated, both to capitalise on the very tiring work done in dialogue with the countries beyond the Iron Curtain, and to reaffirm Europe as a single continent, without curtains to divide it. Helsinki 1975 was an opportunity to recompose the European unity that had been torn apart after Yalta, focusing on a cohesion that was given precisely, in the mind of the Holy See, by the common Christian roots of Europe – even *ante litteram*, before the debate on the ‹Christian roots of Europe› in the early 2000s. This is not what has happened in the last two decades in Europe: two decades of defeat of the efforts to make the ‹Christian roots of Europe› visible in the formal Constitution and in the material constitution of the European Union.³⁷ The crisis of credibility of Catholicism due to the scandals play a role in its public perception, also at the diplomatic level, and in the eyes of the Russian Orthodox civilisational narrative about the metaphysical nature of the war in Ukraine.³⁸ Moreover, during Francis' pontificate, the moral persuasion of the Holy See for peace in Ukraine has come in speeches delivered during international trips to countries in Central Asia (such as Kazakhstan) and in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf Bahrain (Iraq, UAE, Bahrein) that are not examples of the ‹spirit of Helsinki› both in the domestic and international order. In April 2023, Finland joined NATO, thus depriving Europe but also the Vatican of a country whose neutrality was critical in creating a space for dialogue and eventually reaching the 1975 Accords.

Fourth and final: Cardinal Parolin's and Archbishop Gallagher's mentions of Helsinki was also a way to assert internally in the Vatican the importance of a certain tradition of Vatican diplomacy, after the years of marginalisation, if not humiliation, inflicted on the diplomatic corps of the Holy See by the pontificate of Benedict XVI (2005–2013) and especially his Secretary of State, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone (2006–2013), who did not come from the ranks of Vatican diplomacy. Pope Francis' pontificate is different from his predecessor because he has brought back the diplomatic activity of the Holy See to the center of the Catholic

³⁶ On ‹believers without borders› and ‹the civil society strategy› see Jonathan Laurence, *Coping with Defeat. Sunni Islam, Roman Catholicism, and the Modern State*, Princeton (New Jersey) 2021.

³⁷ For the history of the ‹Christian roots of Europe› motif and the change of emphasis during Francis' pontificate, see Sante Lesti, *Il mito delle radici cristiane dell'Europa. Dalla Rivoluzione francese ai giorni nostri*, Turin 2024.

³⁸ See Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralists International. Russia in the Global Culture Wars*, New York 2022.

Church's work. But even Francis has done so in ways that have marginalised the Secretariat of State, relying on personal and parallel diplomatic networks independent of the Secretariat of State, as we could see from the peace efforts of the papacy since February 2022.

Conclusions

Pope Francis has placed his pontificate and the Roman papacy in a new position with respect to both the global political scene and the global dimension of the Catholic Church in the contemporary world.³⁹ In this context, the war in Ukraine represents a major event and a historical rupture that must be considered in the effort to understand the globalisation of Catholicism in the 21st century. Pope Francis embodies the transition in the worldview of the papacy: from a series of European popes who lead the Church during the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War period (from Pius XII to Benedict XVI) to a «global south» pope whose interpretation of recent global history and of international relations today differs significantly from his predecessors, but also differs from the Western cultural and political elites. This is the major reason for the continuing tensions (well into the year 2024) between the Ukrainian and European (especially Eastern Europeans) church leaders and the political establishment on one side, and the pontificate of Francis on the other: it is much more than a simple problem of communication caused by the statements made in the numerous interviews given by pope Francis on the war in Ukraine.

The distance of the Vatican from Western political alliances and, at the same time, the disruption of the liberal international order in which Vatican diplomacy operates make it complicated, if not impossible, to go back to the «spirit of Helsinki» that Pope Francis and Vatican diplomats initially invoked to end the war in Ukraine. The dream of a new Helsinki is elusive because of the geopolitical and religious changes from the time of the Cold War. Compared to 1975, the world of today is multipolar, with a revanchist Russia and the rise of new powers, especially India and China; second tier powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and South Africa vying to protect their national interests and exert influence; declining US engagement in Europe; the role of churches and religions that is often more at the service of ethno-nationalism than of internationalism; and a global crisis of constitutional democracies.

But it is also elusive because the Catholic Church has profoundly changed. Helsinki was based on a unity of the Catholic Church and within the Vatican –

³⁹ See Jan de Volder (ed.), *The Geopolitics of Pope Francis*, Leuven 2019; Antonio Spadaro, *L'atlante di Francesco. Vaticano e politica internazionale*, Venezia 2023, 152–180.

unity in terms of international relations alignments and political culture, which was evident in 1975 but hard to find in the Catholic Church of the post-European papacy. The failure of the Vatican not just to produce a diplomatic breakthrough between Russia and Ukraine, but also the difficulties in crafting its message for peace, shows the depth of the changes that have taken place since 1975 and the early post-Vatican II period. The question concerns, first of all, what the papacy, as the representative and leader of global Catholicism, stands for, both in domestic political arenas and in its international diplomatic activity in the 21st-century disruption of globalisation.

«We Need a New Spirit of Helsinki» – The Holy See's Appeals to Helsinki 1975 for Peace in Ukraine in Historical Perspective

The article analyses the invocations of the «spirit of Helsinki» (the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which saw the Holy See fully involved) during the efforts of Pope Francis and of Vatican diplomacy to end the war in Ukraine following the invasion launched by Russia on 24 February 2022. These invocations were repeated during the first year of the war in Ukraine and showed the distance between the aspirations of the Holy See and those of Russia and Ukraine, but also the difference between Vatican diplomacy and «Ostpolitik» in the context of the Cold War and in the 21st-century disruption of the international order.

Helsinki Accords – Vatican diplomacy – Cold War – Papacy – Ostpolitik – Russia-Ukraine War.

«Wir brauchen einen neuen Geist von Helsinki» – Die Appelle des Heiligen Stuhls an Helsinki 1975 für den Frieden in der Ukraine in einer historischer Perspektive

Der Artikel analysiert die Beschwörungen des «Geistes von Helsinki» (die Helsinki-Vereinbarungen von 1975, an denen der Heilige Stuhl vollumfänglich beteiligt war) während der Bemühungen von Papst Franziskus und der vatikanischen Diplomatie, den Krieg in der Ukraine nach der von Russland am 24. Februar 2022 begonnenen Invasion zu beenden. Diese Beschwörungen wurden während des ersten Jahres des Krieges in der Ukraine wiederholt und zeigten die Distanz zwischen den Bestrebungen des Heiligen Stuhls und denen Russlands und der Ukraine, aber auch den Unterschied zwischen der vatikanischen Diplomatie und der «Ostpolitik» im Kontext des Kalten Krieges und in der Störung der internationalen Ordnung im 21. Jahrhundert.

Abkommen von Helsinki – Vatikan-Diplomatie – Kalter Krieg – Papsttum – Ostpolitik – Russland-Ukraine-Krieg.

«Nous avons besoin d'un nouvel esprit d'Helsinki» – Les appels du Saint-Siège à Helsinki 1975 pour la paix en Ukraine dans une perspective historique

L'article analyse les invocations de «l'esprit d'Helsinki» (les accords d'Helsinki de 1975, dans lesquels le Saint-Siège s'est pleinement impliqué) lors des efforts du pape François et de la diplomatie vaticane pour mettre fin à la guerre en Ukraine suite à l'invasion lancée par la Russie le 24 février 2022. Ces invocations ont été répétées pendant la première année de la guerre en Ukraine et ont montré la distance entre les aspirations du Saint-Siège et celles de la Russie et de l'Ukraine, mais aussi la différence entre la diplomatie vaticane et

«l'Ostpolitik» dans le contexte de la Guerre froide et dans le bouleversement de l'ordre international au 21^{ème} siècle.

Accords d'Helsinki – diplomatie vaticane – Guerre froide – papauté – Ostpolitik – Guerre russo-ukrainienne.

«Abbiamo bisogno di un nuovo spirito di Helsinki» – Gli appelli della Santa Sede a Helsinki 1975 per la pace in Ucraina in una prospettiva storica

L'articolo analizza le invocazioni dello «spirito di Helsinki» (gli accordi di Helsinki del 1975, che videro la Santa Sede pienamente coinvolta) durante gli sforzi di Papa Francesco e della diplomazia vaticana per porre fine alla guerra in Ucraina dopo l'invasione iniziata dalla Russia il 24 febbraio 2022. Queste invocazioni vennero ripetute durante il primo anno di guerra in Ucraina e mostrano la distanza tra le aspirazioni della Santa Sede e quelle della Russia e dell'Ucraina, ma anche la differenza tra la diplomazia vaticana e la «Ostpolitik» nel contesto della guerra fredda e nello sconvolgimento dell'ordine internazionale del XXI secolo.

Accordi di Helsinki – diplomazia vaticana – guerra fredda – papato – Ostpolitik – guerra Russia-Ucraina.

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