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The Public Diplomacy of Pope Francis ^[1]

Pope Francis made it to CPD's list of Top Ten Global Public Diplomacy Actors in 2013 and 2014. He's also expected to make the list again this year. When assessing the Pope through a public diplomacy lens it might not matter where the Pope stands on specific issues. What matters are his strategy and tactics to give the global public a more favorable view of the Vatican that will, over time, increase the Catholic Church's soft power.

For a leader to become influential, their positions on various issues should not only be perceived by their target audience as morally beneficent, but should also make them seem "like-minded." Audience identification with the leader promotes favorable cognitive response to that leader, thereby increasing their global influence. Pope Francis' attitude towards major global issues are aligned with those of the people he is trying to connect (or re-connect) with.

Economic and Social Justice

The overarching framework for most of Pope Francis' advocacy efforts has to do with hard-hitting and blunt criticisms of inequality, ranging from economic issues to social issues caused by globalization and capitalism. He has introduced a new political edge to religion and denounced inequality as "the root of all evil." As shown in his advocacy for immigrants' rights (mainly in the U.S.) and call for Christians to host Syrian Refugees, combatting inequality is a recurring theme. Even in brokering the U.S.-Cuba peace deal, the Pope put major emphasis on ending the embargo which unjustly hurt the Cuban population.

Climate Change

In June of 2015, the Pope issued an encyclical that directly addressed the issue of climate change, calling it a “global problem with grave implications” that represents a “principal challenge facing humanity in our day.” In it, the Pope referenced many scientific sources, implying that Catholicism is not in contrast with science and technology. He also included a very clear call to action for his followers: “The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences.” Like most of his other encyclicals, this one concludes with how environmental issues result in social injustice.

LGBT Rights

The Pope’s “Who am I to judge?” quote is perhaps the most famous among all his statements regarding LGBT rights. That may not be enough in the eyes of a gay couple who want to get married in the church, but Francis’ approach is nonetheless revolutionary in comparison to his predecessors, especially to Pope Benedict XVI who referred to homosexuality as a “disorder” and “a strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil.” The new Pope’s shift in rhetoric is again aligned with his fight against inequality.

Israeli-Palestinian Issues

Pope Francis’ approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue has been bold. He has used various venues to show his support for resolving this decade-long issue. In May of 2015, the Catholic Church officially recognized the State of Palestine and in June of the same year, it signed into treaty a former agreement that used to exist between the Holy See and then Palestine Liberation Organization. This was an affirmation of recognizing Palestine as a state. This happened a year after the Pope’s symbolic visit to the West Bank (directly from Jordan, as opposed to going through Israel), during which he called both Abbas and Peres men of peace. In 2015, the Pope awarded Abbas with a medallion to recognize him as an “angel of peace.”

Digital Diplomacy

In all the aforementioned examples, the Pope’s attitude, not necessarily his exact beliefs, have been at the heart of what makes him seem “similar” and likable by the people he wants to have an impact on. But having the right attitude, symbolic actions (such as entering the U.S. from Cuba), and narrative is not enough; an influential leader should also know the right medium and place to connect with the audience. Pope Francis understands the importance of digital media and its use in his communication with the global public.

As more and more diplomats have realized the importance of digital tools, especially social media, to connect with various stakeholders, Pope Francis has shown mastery in digital diplomacy. According to the Twiplomacy reports of the past couple years, the Pope is the second most followed leader on Twitter, with close to 20 million followers. As Ilan Manor, the author of Digital Diplomacy Blog (digdipblog.com) puts it, “the Catholic Church was an ‘early

adopter' of the networked model of diplomacy. Cardinals, Legates and even Nuns formed a close knit network of diplomats all gathering and disseminating information on behalf of the Bishop of Rome." The new Pope has now digitalized this system, increasing the speed, reach, and efficiency of the Church's strategic communication.

Pope Francis has not changed the Catholic Church's core doctrines, but he has changed the narrative. His public diplomacy is successful because he started by 'listening'. Norman Tanner, a prominent scholar of the history of Catholic Church writes about how the Pope listens "to what the world of the time (including the non-Catholic and non-Christian world) is saying and doing." By telling his target audience what they like to hear, the Pope is changing the public perception of Catholicism, and making it cool again. His efforts have increased favorable views of the Vatican leadership which will ultimately prove to be helpful in advancing Catholic interests worldwide.

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