

# ADDRESS TO THE COMMONWEALTH CLUB ITALY

## Moral Diplomacy and Geopolitics: The Commonwealth and the Vatican Facing Global Challenges

### *Greetings and Introduction*

*Excellencies, Dear Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

It is an honour to be here today to reflect two different traditions which share striking similarities in their symbolic and political roles: the Commonwealth and the Holy See.

Vatican and the Holy See have diplomatic and moral influence capable of affecting global crises. I would like to focus on how their collaboration could be decisive in addressing current conflicts.

### *1. Parallels*

When, in Summer 1944, soon after the liberation of Rome, Winston Churchill was received by Pope Pius XII, the organ of the Christian-Democratic Party, "Il Popolo", published an article by Professor Guido Gonella quoting the official report on the Audience to the effect that, in a conversation marked by affable cordiality, various essential questions concerning important problems of the hour were discussed. It was a critical moment for the future of Europe and, in the light of this fact, the meeting between the highest spiritual Authority and the Representative of the British Commonwealth of Nations necessarily assumed an historical significance. Wishing to break once and for all with an intolerable and mistaken past, it was a question of constructing a new world. The close relations between the Vatican and the British Cabinet on the eve of war were well known, as were the strenuous efforts made by Pius XII to ward off the danger of an approaching catastrophe.

During the whole course of the war, despite inevitable difficulties, the relations between the Vatican and His Majesty's Government were maintained on a plane of active and even cordial co-operation, thanks to the paternal goodwill of the Pope which was sympathetically seconded by the British Minister to the Holy See.

The Pontiff congratulated the King of England on his escape when bombs began to rain on Buckingham Palace, and he was zealous in his care for the refugees from every country and for the prisoners of war in English hands, while he gave fatherly hospitality to the prisoners of the United Nations, who took refuge in the territory of the Vatican City. Again, the Pope's efforts to preserve the City of Rome from bombing were of historical significance. To the Pope's own efforts were added those of his Representatives abroad (above all of Monsignor Godfrey, the Apostolic Delegate to Great Britain) with a view to alleviating the sufferings caused by the war and to re-establishing contact between prisoners of war and their distant families.

«As Catholics and as friends of Great Britain – Professor Gonella continued – we cannot but look ahead with lively confidence to the new paths laid open by the historic encounter» between Pope Pius XII and Churchill. «Two styles, two epochs, two worlds»<sup>1</sup>.

### *The Commonwealth and the Vatican as mediators in current conflicts*

Today, as in the previous century, the world is marked by wars and crises in Ukraine, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. If we look at these situations, we see that both the Commonwealth and the Vatican have links with many of the countries involved.

The United Kingdom and Canada, two key members of the Commonwealth, are among the main supporters of Ukraine. The Vatican has tried to mediate, sending Cardinal Zuppi to Moscow and Kyiv to open a channel for dialogue.

How to collaborate? The Commonwealth, through its diplomatic network, could support Vatican mediation and promote joint humanitarian initiatives. Many Commonwealth countries are directly involved in managing the crisis in the Middle East. The Pope has repeatedly called for a ceasefire, while the Commonwealth can exert diplomatic pressure for sustainable solutions. One possibility for managing such crises is to create a mediation group with religious leaders and diplomats, in order to promote a shared roadmap for peace.

The Vatican has a key role in interreligious dialogue and refugee aid. A joint plan could be set to stabilise the areas of crises area through humanitarian aid and educational investment, with the support of British/Commonwealth diplomacy and Catholic missions.

Besides conflict resolution, there are three major areas in which the Commonwealth and the Vatican can work together:

- a. Mediation and Humanitarian Diplomacy (maybe by a Commonwealth-Vatican Peace Council, with representatives from both institutions, to facilitate negotiations in crisis areas).
- b. Aid to Refugees and War Victims, where catholic structures provide humanitarian assistance.
- c. Commitment to Climate and Food Security.

### *3. Themes of common action between the Vatican and the Commonwealth in international relations*

While operating on different levels, the Vatican and the Commonwealth share many global challenges. Some areas in which they could cooperate are:

- a. Human rights and religious freedom
- b. Promotion of respect for human dignity, freedom of religion and interfaith dialogue. In some Commonwealth countries, the Holy See could act as a very good partner in protecting religious minorities.
- c. Climate change and sustainability The Commonwealth is actively engaged in sustainable development policies, and Pope Francis has repeatedly emphasised the urgency of the environmental issue in his encyclical *Laudato Si*. Together, they

---

<sup>1</sup> Summary Of Article Written By Professor. Guido Gonella And Published In 'Il Popolo', 'Churchill Received By The Pope', National Archives, Kew, FO 371/44213-0033: "Conditions & Politics in Occupied Western Europe, 1940-1945", part 5B: "Vatican. Southern. Anglo-Vatican Relations: Mr. Churchill's Visit To The Pope".

could support concrete measures for the countries most vulnerable to climate change.

- d. Conflict mediation and peace promotion. Vatican diplomacy and the Commonwealth could join efforts in mediating crises in Africa and Asia, two areas where both institutions have a strong influence.
- e. Education and social development. The Holy See and the Commonwealth share the goal of improving access to education in developing countries. The Catholic Church runs many schools and universities in Commonwealth countries, representing a meeting point for the development of joint projects.

#### *4. Operating in a complex world*

The Holy See and the Commonwealth, while having different institutional natures, find themselves operating in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, facing many challenges.

The main common challenges they may face in the near future concern, as I said before, are geopolitical crises and regional conflicts which require mediation.

Many Commonwealth countries are located in regions marked by ethnic, political and religious tensions. The Holy See has historically played a mediating role, while the Commonwealth has promoted dialogue and cooperation among its members. For instance, in South Sudan, the Catholic Church has been instrumental in peace negotiations, while the Commonwealth has provided institutional support.

Climate change and environmental justice is another challenge. Some countries face the risk of disappearing due to rising sea levels. The Holy See, with its ecological commitment could work together with the Commonwealth to support global actions.

As to resource access and sustainable development, the uncontrolled extraction of natural resources in developing countries often contradicts both the social doctrine of the Church and Commonwealth principles on sustainability. See for instance the mining policies in Africa, where many Christian communities suffer the environmental and social impacts of extraction.

As to human rights and religious freedom, Commonwealth countries and the Holy See could find a common path in promoting protection and respect for religious minorities.

The same could be said for women's rights and other cases. There is often division on these issues, but both Commonwealth and the Holy See could play a role in promoting dialogue between different cultures and traditions.

Another task is to assure access to education in the poorest countries. The Holy See runs thousands of schools and universities in Africa, Asia and Latin America, while the Commonwealth supports many educational programmes. Greater collaboration could ensure that more young people have access to education (see for instance the joint programmes for teachers' training in countries such as Nigeria and Uganda)

Other challenges are artificial intelligence and digital ethics. The Church and the Commonwealth need to address the challenges posed by new technologies by ensuring that AI and digital data are used ethically and inclusively (by drawing ethical guidelines for the use of AI in public administration or healthcare in emerging countries).

## *Italy's relationship with the Commonwealth*

My presentation would be incomplete if I omitted to mention the traditional collaborative relations that the Commonwealth has with Italy.

Relations between Italy and the Commonwealth countries span a number of areas, including politics, economics, culture and international cooperation. Italy maintains bilateral relations with many of its nations, both through specific agreements and through participation in multilateral organisations. With the United Kingdom, relations are governed by various post-Brexit agreements, including the 2020-2024 Action Plan to strengthen cooperation in security, defence, economics and research.

With Canada, Italy is bound by the EU's Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), which facilitates trade and investment. With India, Italy has a Strategic Partnership signed in 2023, aimed at strengthening cooperation in defence, trade and scientific research.

On the level of multilateral cooperation, Italy cooperates with Commonwealth countries in the UN, G7, G20, NATO (for member states) and other international organisations to address global issues such as climate change, security and migration. It participates in peace and security missions with Commonwealth partners in theatres such as Africa and the Middle East.

Main areas of cooperation are Industry and manufacturing, agribusiness, energy and ecological transition (see for instance the collaboration with UK, Canada and Australia on renewable energy, particularly hydrogen and solar).

A fruitful collaboration exists also on social relations, migration and mobility. Important Italian communities reside in Canada, Australia, the UK and South Africa, facilitating agreements on visas and dual citizenship. Specific agreements between Italy and Australia allow for facilitated study and work visas for young people (Working Holiday Visa).

Mention should be given also on Italian-Commonwealth cooperation on health care (collaborations with Canada and the UK on medical research, such as in the fight against COVID-19; health projects in Africa with support from Italian NGOs in Commonwealth countries).

A deeply rooted tradition exists also on cultural and Educational Relations, with university agreements and exchange programs between Italian universities and Commonwealth institutions, including the British Council, the Canada-Italy Innovation Award, agreements with Australian and South African universities, academic collaborations on scientific research and technology with India and Canada.

Italian cultural institutes in Commonwealth countries, promote Italian language and culture and various collaborations.

## *Conclusion*

Holy See, Italy and Commonwealth could work together to address these global challenges, combining diplomacy, educational resources and moral influence to promote peace, sustainable development and human rights.

In fact, every party has its own models of global leadership rooted in history, but open to modern challenges. In a world of increasingly complex geopolitical tensions, their moral

influence could prove crucial in fostering dialogue between nations and promoting greater international stability.

*Thank you for your attention.*

Duration: 11m 26s