

Pope Francis plays pivotal role in US-Cuban rapprochement

In Vatican statement, the pontiff reveals his offer earlier this year to facilitate 'constructive dialogue', Vatican City



Pope Francis's pivotal role in a landmark breakthrough in US-Cuba relations was the latest coup for a pontiff whose personality and popularity have made him an influential player on the global stage.

As the world digested news of the historic rapprochement, it emerged that the Vatican had played a central role in bringing together the global capitalist superpower and the tiny communist island whose mutual animosity once brought the planet to the brink of nuclear war.

The success reflects how, barely 18 months after he was elected the leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics, Francis has given Vatican diplomacy the kind of profile it has not enjoyed since Jean-Paul II was being seen as a key player in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communism in eastern Europe.

Congratulating Barack Obama and his Cuban counterpart Raul Castro for taking a major step towards the normalization of relations, Francis revealed that he had offered his offices in October to "facilitate a constructive dialogue on delicate matters, resulting in solutions acceptable to both parties."

Underlining the extent to which Vatican diplomacy has been given new impetus under Francis, a statement said the Argentinian pope would continue to support the opening of a new chapter in relations between the former adversaries.

As a Latin American himself and as a long-standing critic of unfettered capitalism, Francis was well-placed to be regarded by the Cubans as a man they could do business with.

But he also enjoyed credibility with the American side thanks to the Vatican's long involvement in efforts to promote democracy in Cuba, a predominately Catholic island despite being run by communists since the 1959 overthrow of a brutal US-backed dictatorship by forces led by Fidel Castro.

Visits by John Paul II in 1998 and Francis's now-retired predecessor Benedict XVI in 2012 were seen as milestones in the rapprochement between the Vatican and communist regime, but also significant events in terms of indicating to the world that the Cuban regime was open to change.

With his popular touch and willingness to take a stance on issues such as development, exploitation, immigration and social injustice, the pope has become a personality that other world leaders feel obliged to listen to.

That has been reflected by the string of heads of state and government beating a path to the Vatican in the hope that some of Francis's star quality will rub off on them.

His interventions on the diplomatic stage are led by Italian cardinal Pietro Parolin, a softly-spoken veteran of Vatican diplomacy who was this year dispatched to Venezuela to act as an intermediary during a tense stand-off between the government and opposition in the South American state.

Francis's style is different from that of the Polish pope, Jean Paul II, who was far more overtly political and never shied away from revealing his hostility to the principles and practice of communism in his homeland and the rest of the Soviet empire.

Francis likes to insist he is but a humble priest, constantly emphasizing the pastoral over the political.

He sees his role in international politics as a facilitator, someone who can take a strong moral stance on a particular situation, make the case for dialogue and then withdraw, leaving the parties to a particular conflict to make the moves required for peace themselves.

In May he made headlines by praying in front of the wall between Israel and the Palestinian territories in what was described as a provocative gesture designed to jolt both sides of the conflict into reflecting on their respective positions and to contemplate dialogue.

He then invited the Israeli and Palestinian leaders Shimon Peres and Mahmud Abbas for joint prayers at the Vatican, while stressing all the time that peace negotiations were not for him to lead.

He has at times been criticized for adopting ambiguous positions: notably on Syria, where the Assad regime is supported by many Christians, and Iraq, where he has wobbled on whether airstrikes against Islamic State militants can be justified.

He has also appeared to sit on the fence over the Russia-Ukraine conflict and, when he visited South Korea, failed to deliver the kind of strong criticism of North Korea that would have been expected from John Paul II.

Bolstered by his success in Cuba, bolder initiatives on other fronts may now be forthcoming. AFP

Jean-Louis de la Vaissiere for AFP