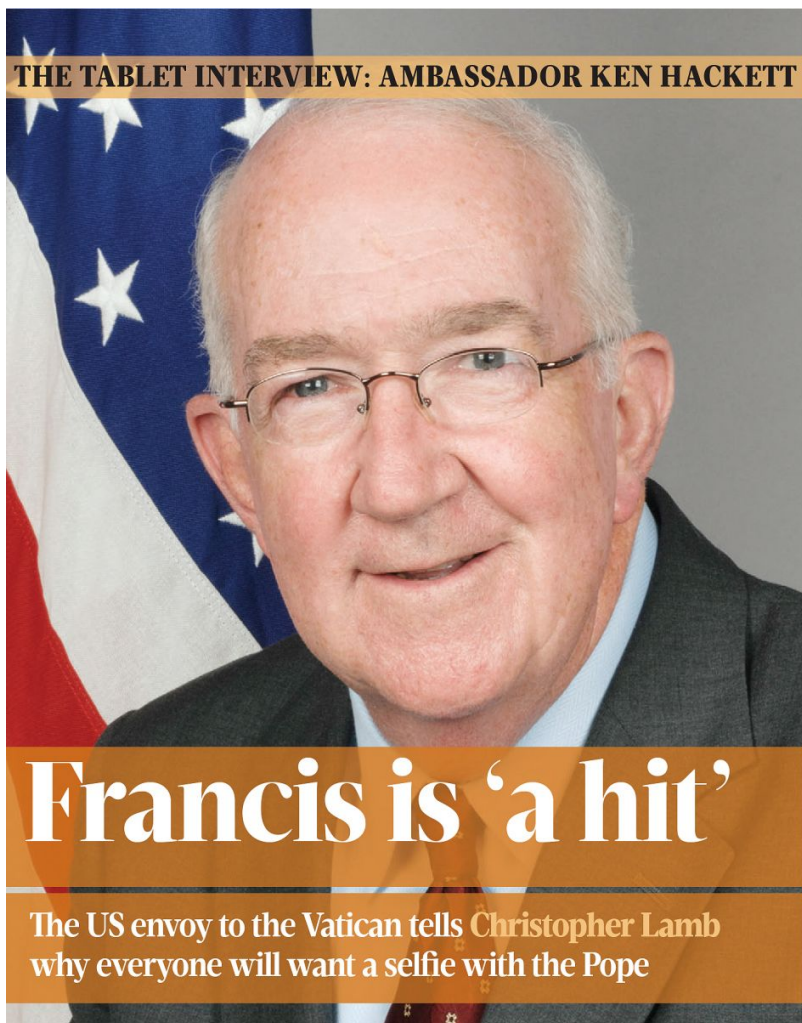


Interview: Ambassador Ken Hackett on Pope Francis visit to US



AGRAND AND IMPOSING building just off the elegant Via Veneto in Rome, which featured in Federico Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita*, is the new home of the US embassy to the Vatican. Security is understandably tight around the nineteenth-century palazzo, which already houses the embassy to Italy and the country's mission to various United Nations agencies. All visitors are required to submit their passports for inspection. Ambassador Ken Hackett runs one of the largest Vatican embassies, with a staff of 17.

A former president of Catholic Relief Services, the considerable Church-run humanitarian organisation in the US, he was nominated for his post by President Barack Obama in June 2013, and moved to Rome that October. In recent weeks, his team has been busier than usual preparing for Pope Francis' hotly anticipated visit to New York, Washington and Philadelphia, following his trip to Cuba.

As the 78-year-old Argentinian Pope has never visited the United States – and is reluctant to speak in English – this is going to be one of his more challenging ventures. It is further complicated by the impression that Francis is not overly enamoured with America. The former Archbishop of Buenos Aires is undoubtedly aware how some of his countrymen view the US: not as the land of the free, but as the land of the free market that has bred an aggressive form of capitalism.

During the Cold War era, the country was seen to be propping up dictators in Latin America while its

companies stand accused of plundering natural resources. While he is popular among ordinary Catholics, Francis' critique of unbridled capitalism and his recent encyclical calling for action on climate change, *Laudato si'*, have led to a drop in his approval ratings among some in the US. No wonder Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, told an interfaith gathering in May that the Pope was a "little nervous" about his forthcoming visit.

HACKETT, HOWEVER, is optimistic about the trip, which will include a visit to President Obama at the White House, addresses to Congress and the United Nations, and saying Mass for the conclusion of the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia. The itinerary also makes room for encounters with the homeless, a visit to Harlem and Ground Zero in New York, the site of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"Forget about polls, he's a hit," Hackett tells me. "I hope the American people, who have been excited about the visit, are able to realise that he is what he appears to be. He is genuine. He is a pope of great compassion, a great pastor, a man who is not afraid to talk about big ideas, and throw challenges on the table." Some of those challenges, the ambassador explains, will include America's treatment of immigrants, the poor and the criminal justice system. "He will probably call on Congress to recapture and re-engage with the principles that made our nation – hospitality, generosity, welcoming the stranger. And then he will go into things like migration, poverty and people who are excluded.

"I think he will talk about freedom of religion and worship, and use that as the springboard to [talk about] persecution of Christians and other minorities. And I think he will be talking in Congress to the American people, not just to the legislators."

WHILE IN PHILADELPHIA, Francis will visit the city's largest prison, the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility, an event that will provide him with an opportunity to talk about the rehabilitation of offenders – and maybe about capital punishment. Hackett concedes that the US prison system has become big business. "We've basically subcontracted the running of our prisons to private corporations. They're vested in maintaining [the status quo]. It's insidious."

When it comes to rehabilitation, he gives an example: "What are you doing to people when you put 17-year-old kids in jail for 10 years for selling a little bit of grass? Because in this state it's illegal, but if you go across the border it's not. I'm exaggerating, but it is this kind of silly stuff." At a political level, however, the Pope's approach will be to try to find common ground with the Obama administration. Hackett believes the Pope is more likely to talk about how to tackle climate change and help those forgotten by society rather than the Church's opposition to gay marriage. "He is going to talk about respect and concern and compassion for people," Hackett says. At the same time, given that the US is only just over a year away from a presidential election, Hackett says with a smile that "every one of the presidential candidates will do their best to get a selfie with him. Even Donald [Trump]."

Francis' visit to the US cannot be seen separately from the visit to Cuba. Diplomatic relations between the two countries have now been restored following decades of hostility. Breaking the deadlock was down partly to Pope Francis, who was thanked by President Obama for his role in the process. "The Vatican played an important interlocutor role. The Holy Father played a critical, vital role in ensuring things moved ahead," Hackett says.

He adds: "While not every Latin American government agreed with what was going on in Cuba, the

fact that the Cuban Government was not invited to things, that they were always on the outside, was dampening things. Pope Francis knew all of that.” President Obama felt the same way and the Pope was helped by both Cardinal Pietro Parolin, his secretary of state, who had been papal ambassador to Venezuela, and his deputy, Archbishop Giovanni Becciu, a former nuncio to Cuba.

The Pope’s role, explains Hackett, was not to “sit at the table and negotiate the deal” but to help facilitate it. “His relations with Cardinal [Jaime] Ortega [in Cuba] and with Cardinal [Seán] O’Malley in the US were regular enough that there were enough people engaged at different levels so that things could happen.” He says that Francis’ engagement with world affairs has energised diplomats accredited to the Vatican, and has bolstered the Holy See’s traditional position of being an important global soft power. “When [the] Cuba [visit] was announced in December,

numerous ambassadors wanted to know right away, ‘What was the engagement of the Vatican?’ Why? ‘Because,’ they said, ‘I’ve got to get a cable back to headquarters as they are trying to cut my budget.’” The Pope’s approach to his visit to the US is likely to stand out for his encounters with people on the margins. This is already a hallmark of his papacy, and last Friday he took part in an ABC News moderated virtual chat taking questions from a range of speakers.

They included a homeless mother of two, a religious sister working with the poor and a young man living in a shelter. In line with this approach, there is even talk of a meeting with sex-abuse victims during the trip.

BRINGING MERCY TO those suffering will also be Francis’ approach at the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, the Vatican-organised gathering that is the main reason for his visit. Hackett says the Pope will try to reach out to “families under pressure”, though he does not believe there are any plans to change church teaching. This will please a number of US bishops, some of whom have found Francis’ approach disconcerting. The US hierarchy has developed a reputation for its “culture warrior” approach, speaking out against abortion and gay marriage, for example. The bishops also vigorously opposed President Obama’s health-care reforms, which mandated employers to provide contraception coverage. For his part, the Pope said early in his papacy that it was not necessary continually

to speak out on these topics. When he does – such as in the case of his announcement last week that priests will be able to absolve women who have had abortions during the Jubilee Year of Mercy – it is done with an emphasis on compassion. Hackett, who worked for the American bishops during a 40-year career at Catholic Relief Services, says the majority of the US hierarchy are “centrists” with the more “doctrinaire” getting a lot of media attention. He admits that some were not initially happy with the election of Francis, and concedes that it remains a challenge to those who “really like laws that are clear, well defined and you know how far you can go”. At the same time, he acknowledges that many bishops have “come to the centre” since Francis’ election.

Yet it is not to calm church leaders’ anxieties that Francis is going to the US. His method starts with those on the peripheries. And this remains his approach when visiting a country that often sees itself as the centre of the world.

