



***Pope Francis addresses the diplomatic corps
at the Vatican last month***

Faith Focus - My Vatican journey

**Sally Axworthy, the UK Ambassador to the
Holy See, writes...**

Through the centre of Siena runs the ancient pilgrimage route known as the Via Francigena, which begins in Canterbury and ends in Rome.

Last summer, while studying Italian in Siena, I explored the route and saw the churches and hostels that had sprung up in the city for pilgrims during the Middle Ages. From Siena, the Via Francigena winds its way south through the towns of the Val d'Orcia, following the route taken by Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury, more than 1,000 years ago after he had received his pallium from the Pope. Many of the churches and abbeys on Sigeric's itinerary are still there, enabling us to imagine what it must have been like for 10th-century British pilgrims travelling to Rome.

My own journey to Rome took place last August when I arrived to take up my job as Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Holy See. Although diplomatic relations were only restored with the Holy See in 1914 (and the mission only became a full embassy in 1982), the Via Francigena reminds us that the relationship goes back much farther. Even now in Rome I see reminders of home everywhere: from the church from which St Gregory sent St Augustine to convert Britain in 596 to the many portraits of St Thomas More and Blessed John Henry Newman, both an inspiration to many present-day Catholics.

The tangible presence of history is one of the things that distinguishes the Vatican from most

modern foreign ministries. Not just in the buildings (visitors are received in the Vatican's baroque meeting rooms) or the formality reminiscent of another age. The Holy See takes the long view. Its plans are not bounded by the prospect of elections every five years. The Pope consequently speaks of those overarching issues that have an impact on all of us: migration, climate change, war and terrorism, human suffering in all its modern forms.

Doing foreign policy with the Holy See is different to elsewhere. For a start, its scale is significantly smaller than the average foreign affairs ministry. Unlike the Foreign Office, which has many teams of people to design and implement policy, the Vatican foreign ministry has fewer than 50 staff. Most are *minutanti*, or experts, with just two senior officials, the British Archbishop Paul Gallagher and the Maltese Mgr Antoine Camilleri, leading the operation. With these small resources the Vatican achieves impressive results – the Holy See helped bring about the restoration of full diplomatic relations between the US and Cuba, supported the peace process in Colombia, and is now engaged in Venezuela.

The Vatican relies extensively on its bishops' conferences in each country. This allows the

Catholic Church to engage at the local level. In the Democratic Republic of Congo the bishops mediated the recent peace agreement and bishops (including Anglicans) are at the forefront of efforts to bring peace to South Sudan. Vatican foreign policy is, in this way, very “bottom up”: rooted in the concerns of the local people and bishops.

These differences mean significant potential benefits for traditional foreign ministries such as our own working with the Holy See. We bring foreign policy resources and influence in organisations such as the UN. The Vatican draws on its 5,000 bishops worldwide and its 800,000 religious women and men, who often work with victims of human trafficking, modern slavery and sexual violence in conflict, all issues on which the British Government is highly engaged. The religious orders work on the ground, in some places that Western diplomats find it hard to go to, but are linked in to their superiors in Rome.

Organisations such as the Jesuit Refugee Service direct their resources to where they see the greatest needs. Linking this knowledge of local problems with our Government’s experience of using international machinery to impede the perpetrators will help us make real progress in ending some of these scourges.

I hope over the next four years to walk a good part of the Via Francigena, but also to make the journey towards understanding the Holy See and providing a bridge between the Vatican and the UK government. Our common history, from its early unity, has sometimes over the centuries been difficult.

I hope in a small way to be able to contribute to the warmer relations that have characterised recent years, and to use that relationship to further the issues that are important to both of our countries.

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