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Catholic Diplomacy and Advocacy in the European Union: The Role of the Holy See and Catholic Actors since Maastricht

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Far from being a relic of the past, religion continues to shape international relations in ways that are often underexplored. This dynamic is exemplified in the unique encounter between the Holy See and the European Union. In fact, while operating within established diplomatic and institutional frameworks, both are often described as sui-generis actors in world politics: the former combines the attributes of a sovereign state with the spiritual authority of the Catholic Church, whereas the latter constitutes a hybrid supranational polity not reducible to traditional categories of statehood or international organization. Therefore, exploring the mechanisms of their interaction is particularly valuable to understand how these unicorns shape contemporary governance by relying less on coercive means than on persuasion and dialogue.

Against this background, this thesis will be guided by the following research question: *how have the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels sought to influence European integration since the Maastricht Treaty?* The relevance of this study is thus two-fold. From a theoretical perspective, it contributes to the existing knowledge on Catholicism and the EU by delving deeper into how frameworks of soft power, advocacy, and EU interest representation apply to a religious network that does not fit into conventional categories, thus shedding light on how non-state and faith-based institutions operate within secular EU structures. Socially, the topic resonates well with broader debates about the place of religion in democratic and pluralistic decision-making, with moral and ethical considerations often at stake in the EU domains of migration, social justice, education, and sustainability.

This research thus emerges for its originality in attempting to bridge two fields of scholarship that have traditionally evolved in separate ways, namely the study of the Holy See diplomacy in international relations and the literature on lobbying and interest representation in the European Union. On the one hand, while the research on the Holy See global role is expanding, especially in terms of its historical and theological implications, its engagement with the EU institutions remains understudied. Conversely, existing studies on EU interest representations cover business, professional, and civil society actors for the most part, often devoting little attention to churches and faith-based organizations. Therefore, by analyzing the Holy See engagement in Brussels since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, this thesis aims to fill this gap, providing new insights into the intersection of religion, diplomacy, and EU advocacy.

Much attention in the literature has been devoted to the Holy See status as a sovereign subject under international law, distinct from the Vatican City State and the Roman Catholic Church, as well as its legal personality and its enduring moral authority in international affairs, grounded in symbolic capital and universalist claims to legitimacy rather than material resources (Araujo, 2001; Cismas, 2014; Lajolo, 2005; Morss, 2015). Scholars have also examined, albeit less systematically, the evolution, practices, structure, and power of the Holy See diplomacy, from the traditional bilateral agreements with states, known as concordats, through the multilateral turn of the 20th century, to the increased focus on universal issues like peace, development and human rights (Cardinale, 1976; Chamedes, 2013; Graham, 1959; Hehir, 1990; Lajolo, 2005; Stummvoll, 2018; Tomasi, 2017). With regard to these values and positions, often highlighted in the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) doctrine, more recent studies have explored in greater depth the specific dynamics of the Holy See public diplomacy, analyzing its pillars, communication strategies, framing of global debates, and mobilization of the Catholic network worldwide (Beckett, 2021; Gęsiak, 2017; Matlary, 2001; Stummvoll, 2018; Tomasi, 2017; Troy, 2018). Nevertheless, this body of research remains underexplored in relation to the European Union, where the Holy See diplomatic identity intersects with a uniquely complex institutional environment.

Parallel strands of scholarship on the European Union have focused on the evolution of both its foreign policy institutions and external strategies. From early accounts of the European Political Cooperation to more recent analyses of the Union's Global Strategy, scholars have emphasized the reliance of the EU on public diplomacy as a tool to project its influence abroad, through its normative voice, storytelling, and regional tailoring (Hedling, 2019; Kutyrev & Marchukov, 2024; Nuttall, 1992; Tocci, 2017). This fed into wider debates on the Union's international identity, with the EU being conceptualized as either a civilian, normative, or market power, focusing on values, norms, and rules respectively (Damro, 2012; Duchêne, 1973; Manners, 2002). Alongside foreign policy, European studies have produced an extensive literature on the second aspect this thesis will focus on, namely interest representation, providing the lenses to analyze how non-state actors gain access to the EU institutions. Greenwood's (2011) account portrays lobbying in Brussels as a pluralistic and heterogeneous environment, whereas Bouwen's (2002) theory of access goods stresses the importance of expertise, legitimacy, and information in exchange for an institutional entry point. Majone's (1996) classic work on the EU as a regulatory state further helps explain why such expertise becomes pivotal in shaping increasingly technical and bureaucratic decisions, whereas Keck and Sikkink's (1998) book on transnational advocacy networks (TANs) illustrates how NGOs use coalition-building to influence decision-making. Finally, Beyers and De Bruycker's (2019) insider–

outsider model sheds light on how actors balance formal consultation with external mobilization. Together, these theories also provide the theoretical starting point for this thesis, which uses them to examine the underexplored case of the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels, to better understand their engagement and strategies.

On this basis, this thesis advances two interrelated hypotheses. The first is that *since 1992, the Holy See and the Catholic network in Brussels have developed a structured and adaptive engagement strategy, leveraging moral authority and value-based messaging to attempt to influence the EU policy discourse despite institutional and normative constraints".* The second one is that *since 1992, a morality-anchored model has given the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels comparative strength in discursive and procedural arenas and only selective, often long-run, substantive payoffs, varying by sector according to EU competence and technocratic demand*.

Therefore, the temporal scope of this thesis extends from the 1992 Maastricht Treaty up until the 2025 election of Pope Leo XIV. The Maastricht Treaty constitutes, in fact, the first major watershed moment for the Holy See – EU relations and Catholic actors in Brussels: the combination of new procedural opportunities under the supranational pillar and the enhanced legislative role of the European Parliament enabled them to evolve from sporadic, symbolic interventions to a more continuous presence in EU policymaking (Coen, 2007, pp. 9-10; Dinan, 2014, p. 26, 239-242; Leustean, pp. 11, 22). This transformation prepared the ground for the later consolidation of their position, which reached its peak with the Lisbon Treaty (2009) and Article 17 TFEU, granting churches and religious organizations an institutionalized and lasting framework for dialogue with the Union (Liedhegener, 2013, p. 194). Furthermore, given the very recent election of Pope Leo XVI and the resulting lack of available sources, this thesis will concentrate on the game-changing pontificate of John Paul II, the shorter papacy of Benedict XVI, and the transformative agenda of Pope Francis, allowing for an assessment of continuity in the engagement dynamics over more than three decades.

The empirical investigation will focus on five policy domains: migration, environmental sustainability, socio-economic rights, education, and external relations. These themes were chosen as they are deeply grounded in Catholic values and traditions: they are often mentioned in papal encyclicals, speeches, and other documents guiding the Holy See engagement on the international stage, and are then translated by the Catholic associations into actionable inputs for advocacy purposes (Caritas Europa, 2025a; CIDSE, 2025; COMECE, 2017, 2018b, 2022; Francis, 2015, 2020; John Paul II, 1987). Taken together, these themes thus offer a representative cross-section of how the

Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels seek to bring value-based perspectives into the EU policy process.

From a methodological perspective, this thesis adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on international relations, European studies, and political theology to capture the complexity of engagement between two sui generis polities, bridging separate conceptual traditions. Additionally, the analysis relies on primary sources, including treaties, policy documents, papal speeches and encyclicals, and publications from Catholic organizations in Brussels, showing how Catholic actors respond to EU institutional positions across the domains under scrutiny, and on secondary literature providing context and background. Finally, the study combines discourse analysis, justified by the centrality of narratives and ethical framings, with institutional analysis, suited to assessing access mechanisms available to Catholic actors. This approach will thus show both the evolution of Catholic engagement and the processes through which they influence EU decision-making.

The structure of the thesis ultimately reflects these objectives and methods. Chapter 2 conceptualizes the Holy See diplomacy, tracing its historical evolution, before examining the polity's ambiguous statehood, legal personality, diplomatic structures, and customs. It then considers its public diplomacy specifically, analyzing approaches, practices, and a normative agenda rooted in Catholic Social Teaching. Chapter 3 then turns to the European Union, tracing the evolution of its external action and competing visions of global identity, examining its reliance on public diplomacy, and reviewing five approaches to interest representation - Greenwood, Bouwen, Majone, Keck and Sikkink, and Beyers and De Bruycker - which form the theoretical basis for subsequent sections. Chapter 4 consequently explores the strategies of the Holy See and Catholic advocacy networks in Brussels, starting with the religious context, then analyzing the role of the Apostolic Nunciature, papal visits and speeches, as well as thematic priorities. It further discusses the role of COMECE, JRS, Caritas Europa, and CIDSE, together with soft power strategies and tensions limiting Catholic engagement in Brussels. Chapter 5 subsequently opens with a discussion of the Maastricht Treaty as a turning point for advocacy, before assessing the impact of the aforementioned strategies by comparing Catholic influence with other interest groups, distinguishing between discursive, procedural, and substantive influence, and analyzing patterns across five domains: migration, sustainability, socioeconomic rights, education, and external relations. Lastly, the thesis concludes by reiterating the main findings, reflecting on the limits of this study, and outlining avenues for future research on the relations between the Catholic actors and the European Union.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUALIZING HOLY SEE DIPLOMACY

2.1 Definition and Evolution of Holy See Diplomacy

2.1.1 Definitions

The Holy See is a unique actor in the world of diplomacy, positioning itself at the intersection of state and non-state religious actors. This is because of its very peculiar nature, which requires a distinction between two terms: Holy See and Vatican City. The former can be defined as "the institutionalized manifestation of the Pope's supreme authority over the whole Catholic Church and his sovereign authority to act in the name of the Church" (Lajolo, 2005, p. 3). The latter, instead, is officially known as Vatican City State and is understood as the seat of the Roman Catholic Church and a 44-hectare enclave in Rome (Lajolo, 2005, p. 4). As such, according to the Conciliation Treaty of the Lateran Pacts, it is "under full ownership, exclusive dominion, sovereign authority and jurisdiction of the Holy See" [own translation] (Italia & Santa Sede, 1929, art. 3). Therefore, strictly speaking, it is the Holy See, and not the Vatican City State, that enjoys international legal personality and conducts diplomatic relations. However, for stylistic variation, the term 'Vatican diplomacy' will occasionally be used in this thesis, though the distinction should always be kept in mind.

The religious polity thus operates on two levels: as a traditional state, it engages in traditional diplomatic relations with other countries, maintaining bilateral ties with several states worldwide as well as multilateral ones in international organizations. However, it also acts as a non-state transnational religious actor, making its voice heard through religious networks and advocacy on moral and ethical issues. As a consequence, its engagement in diplomatic relations somehow differs from traditional states, whose main focus is mostly on finding military alliances, signing economic agreements, and pursuing territorial interests. Vatican diplomacy is more centered around soft power, using its moral authority, ethical persuasion, and religious networks to exert influence. Therefore, as will be explained below in greater depth, the Holy See has a unique way of combining formal diplomatic powers, i.e., treaties, embassies, etc., with soft power derived from its worldwide religious networks as well as advocacy on specific issues. This distinctive dual nature, combining the features of a sovereign state with those of a transnational religious actor, makes it a compelling actor to analyze. Its relevance for this thesis is further enhanced by the similarity the polity shares with the European Union, the other subject examined. In fact, while different in origin and purpose, they both rely on soft power and normative influence rather than coercion through military means. This uncommon yet meaningful analogy provides the rationale behind examining their interaction in this

thesis, in an attempt to shed light on the interplay between value-based diplomacy and supranational governance.

2.1.2 Evolution of the Holy See Diplomacy

The Holy See and its relations with the rest of the world evolved in different directions over the centuries. While the central focus of this thesis is on the period following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, a brief review will be provided for context and to better understand how the contemporary situation came into being. To this end, first and foremost, it should not be forgotten that Papal diplomacy is as old as the catholic church itself and that, despite unfolding differently than the temporal power of the popes, the two are inextricably linked to each other in a self-reinforcing cycle (Cardinale, 1976, p. 99). In particular, different periods can be identified, distinguishing divergent ways of doing diplomacy: the Early Church (from the 4th until the 15th century), the Renaissance and Early Modern period (from the 15th until the 18th century), the 19th-century Papal States, the 20th-century post-Lateran Treaty era, the Cold War, and the 21st century.

Starting in 313 AD, Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan was revolutionary as it was not only the first document in the Western World to recognize freedom of religion, but it also gave Christianity the status of the Roman Empire's official religion (Mutie, 2021, pp. 40-42). As a consequence, Christianity progressively gained legitimacy, and representatives of the papacy could already be found in remote Christian territories as early as 380 AD, ensuring Christian unity long before the temporal power of the Church was established: the first form of papal representatives were the *apocrisiarii* to the Emperors of Constantinople, although no one considered them as proper ambassadors, not to be confused with the Legati, entrusted with representation in special missions (Cardinale, 1976, p. 63).

Moving into the Middle Ages, thanks to the territorial donations of Pepin and Charlemagne, the Papal States were established, giving the polity territorial power (Dawczyk, 2019, p. 65). Throughout this period, the papacy became increasingly involved in external and territorial issues, thus requiring a delegation of certain powers to its representatives abroad, with its soft power waxing and waning as a result of the unfolding of several events. For instance, the investiture controversy marked an important moment where the Catholic Church and the Holy Roman Empire in medieval Europe clashed over the ability to choose and install bishops, leading to a war lasting nearly fifty years (Blumenthal, 1988, pp. 142-167). At the end of it, the Concordat of Worms (1122 AD) required an oath of loyalty to the monarch, but the selection was placed in the hands of the Pope exclusively in

Italy and Burgundy, whereas in Germany, the Emperor was allowed to preside and arbitrate disputes (Blumenthal, 1988, pp. 167-173). In summary, everyone wanted to gain greater control over what was happening at the community level, and having a say in the nomination of religious representatives helped achieve that goal. This conflict is just one of many instances showing the great amount of soft power already held by the Catholic Church and the papacy in Europe and elsewhere during this period.

During the subsequent Avignon Papacy (1309-1378), seven popes ruled the Western Church from the South of France: during this period, the Holy See administrative apparatus underwent an extraordinary process of centralization of power that would influence its structural organization for the centuries to come (Falkeid, 2017, pp. 2-3; Rollo-Koster, 2015, p. 1). Furthermore, the geographical proximity to the French Crown caused greater influence of European diplomacy on the papacy, including its external relations: not by chance, one of the most famous events of this time was the Chinese mission sent by Emperor Shund in 1336 to Avignon, reciprocated by the Papal delegation sent to Beijing in 1342 (Lajolo, 2005, p. 17).

Then, in the 15th and 16th centuries, following the birth of modern nation-states and the evolution of their relations, diplomats became more permanent figures: it thus became more widespread for states to accredit their permanent resident ambassadors to the Pope in Rome and, although the old forms of representation were enough for the papacy at first, it began to reciprocate starting with Milan and Venice around 1500 (Lajolo, 2005, p. 17). However, up until this moment, only representatives from Catholic states or Catholic communities in non-Catholic states (i.e., Sweden, Russia, and Prussia) were accepted at the Roman Court, and all diplomatic ties among Catholic and non-Catholic countries had been cut following the 1517 Religious Reformation (Lajolo, 2005, p. 19). Another fundamental moment in this regard was the Council of Trent (1545-1563), lasting 18 years and spanning five popes, which not only condemned the errors promulgated by Luther and the other Reformers but also issued several regulatory decrees aimed at centralizing the ecclesiastical authority in Rome and its presence in Catholic communities in Europe, thus expanding its diplomatic network (Amougou, 2021, pp. 8-9). Nevertheless, the first taste of papal diplomacy as we know it today only emerged in the late 1700s, when the secular post-French Revolution France under Napoleon recognized the papal representatives in the country, thus virtually forcing the Pope to reciprocate against his will (Graham, 1959, pp. 40-41). Another important moment occurred when a Prussian representative started being seen around the Roman Court and participating in official ceremonies, with ties between the Pope

and Prussia having been particularly severed since the Religious Reformation (Graham, 1959, pp. 41-42).

Despite this stepping stone, this period proved to be extremely difficult for papal diplomacy. In fact, after having enjoyed great popularity in the early 17th century, it began a slow but steady decline following the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, mostly due to the opposition the Pope was facing from anti-Roman movements and the battle the Catholic church was fighting against the narrowness of some local churches (Cardinale, 1976, pp. 70-71). This trend, however, was reversed by the Congress of Vienna, which not only recognized the Pope as the Spiritual Head of the Catholic church but also made nuncios the deans in diplomatic corps, thus granting them precedence in the ceremonial rules, marking the beginning of a new era of splendor and shine for papal diplomacy, especially in the relations with the Americas (Boczek, 2005, p. 47; Lajolo, 2005, p. 19).

During the 19th century, up until the extinction of the papal states in 1870, papal diplomacy grew increasingly, with the Holy See expanding its diplomatic ties to new areas but with some complications. For instance, ties between Rome and the Czarist Russia based in St. Petersburg were never easy due to the question of Poland, whose territory was partially annexed by Catherine II and inhabited by a fervent catholic majority for which the Holy See wanted greater protection, always denied (Dunn, 2004/2017, pp. 38-39). Until the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1914, the interactions with England were also troublesome, and despite several attempts in the 19th century, the Parliament never agreed to let the Royal Family receive any representatives from Rome (Graham, 1959, p. 69).

In 1870, a major turning point occurred when the Italian troops breached through Porta Pia, marking the temporary fall of the papal states and the end of the pope's temporal power over the central territories of the peninsula (Vidotto, 2023, *Chapter 1.1*). In fact, the Kingdom of Italy was then seeking to incorporate all Italian territories, including Rome, as part of its unification process, and those areas previously belonging to the Catholic Church in Rome were annexed to the newly unified country (Vidotto, 2023, *Chapter 4.1*). As a consequence of this show of force, the then Pope Pius IX refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Italian claim over Rome and retreated into the Vatican, proclaiming himself a prisoner of the latter: it was the beginning of the Roman question (Vidotto, 2023, *Chapter 3.4*). Despite the territorial losses and regardless of its debated right to act as an independent personality on the international stage, Vatican diplomacy continued to expand throughout this period: during the temporary absence of territory between 1870 and 1929, mutual

representations increased from sixteen to twenty-nine (Lajolo, 2006, 16 February). Although the Holy See is often depicted as a marginal player in the aftermath of WWI, it managed to expand its power thanks to the tools of international law and bilateral diplomacy by proposing a new Catholic vision of the international arena based on closer cooperation between the Church and the state (Chamedes, 2013, p. 955). Thanks to the contribution of certain Holy See diplomats who promoted a different worldview founded on anti-Communism and partially undermining the principles of the League of Nations, the Holy See thus claimed a more prominent role in European political affairs despite its lack of territory (Chamedes, 2013, p. 955).

In 1929, the Roman question was eventually settled through the Lateran Treaty, part of the three Lateran Pacts, signed and ratified by Mussolini and Victor Emmanuel III on the Italian side and by Pope Pius XI for the Holy See (D'Ottavi, 2020, pp. 110-112). The treaty recognized Vatican City as an independent state under the sovereignty of the religious polity, enabling it to regain control of some form of territory after almost sixty years, and also agreed to give the Catholic Church compensation for the loss of the Papal States (D'Ottavi, 2020, pp. 110-112). Contrary to what may be expected, this move did not result in a sudden increase in the number of states with which the Holy See had diplomatic relations, but rather grew over time, and with an explosion after WWII (Cardinale, 1976, p. 71).

On this note, the role played by Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) and Vatican diplomats during the Second World War and the Holocaust is very debated. First of all, regarding the allegiances, although the Holy See proclaimed itself neutral, the situation was slightly more blurred: while not enthusiastic of Hitler and his entourage's actions, Vatican circles were not overtly anti-German either (McGoldrick, 2012, p. 1047). Furthermore, the pope himself, Pius XII, was terribly afraid of Communism and its ideology based on the annihilation of the church he led, but welcomed the idea of an Anglo-American leadership in Europe (McGoldrick, 2012, p. 1047). Regarding the Holocaust, on the one hand, the Catholic community was unprepared to face a human massacre of such scale due to its evolving relations with the Jewish people and the prevalence of the anti-Communist narrative (Phayer, 2000, pp. 117-119). On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that some members of the Catholic communities at all levels, including diplomats like Angelo Roncalli, future Pope John XXIII, tried to lend a hand in whatever way they could to help save Jews from extermination, but it was simply not enough (Phayer, 2000, pp. 117-119). However, the fact that Holy See diplomacy was able to obtain only limited results with the resources available should not come as a surprise, and the focus should thus be placed more on other elements: firstly, despite being silent in public, Pius XII conducted

several negotiations and was in constant communications with Vatican representatives before and throughout the war to pressure for relief actions; secondly, the Holy See contributed to the success of several humanitarian missions at the time; thirdly, the religious polity went a long way to provide hope and consolation to the prisoners' families (Blet, 1999, p. 792). In light of these complexities, the role of Holy See diplomacy during WWII should not only be assessed based on its silence and limited political leverage but rather on its capacity to conduct discreet humanitarian efforts preserving its neutral spiritual mission in unprecedently catastrophic times.

After the end of the war, the Holy See started re-evaluating its relations with other parts of the world, starting precisely with the Jews, resulting in a great expansion of Vatican diplomacy to several new countries of the Near and Far East (Cardinale, 1976, p. 71). These developments were a direct consequence of the renewed role that papal diplomacy came to have during the 20th century, especially during the two major conflicts, clearly going beyond the simple fulfillment of material interests and focusing on the well-being and progress of individuals as well as nations in respect of the word of God and the freedom of the Catholic Church (Cardinale, 1976, p. 71). This evolution continued during the subsequent Cold War era, fostering an important change in the foreign policy of the Holy See. In the early stages of the confrontation between the US and the USSR under the papacy of Pius XII, the stance of the Holy See was still aligned with the West and heavily anti-communist (Hehir, 1990, pp. 27-28). However, the trend started reversing with Pope John XXIII (1958-1963), who moved away from confrontation towards limited engagement, marking the beginning of the Vatican Ostpolitik: this period saw the religious polity acting as an important mediator in the Cuban Missile Crisis and opening a dialogue with Soviet leaders (Hehir, 1990, p. 30). He also wrote the game-changing encyclical *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, highlighting the distinction between ideologies and people as well as the movements involved in them, thus paving the way for greater collaboration with non-Catholics in some areas (Hehir, 1990, p. 31). This process was then institutionalized under Paul VI (1963-1978), who expanded negotiations with regimes in Eastern Europe to ensure a better position for the Catholic Church there and strengthened the image of a Holy See engaged in international affairs by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in Moscow in 1971 and showing greater attention to the issues of the Global South, especially South America (Hehir, 1990, pp. 33-34).

Then came John Paul II (1978-2005), one of the most influential popes of all time, who fostered change in his home country, Poland, and Eastern Europe in general by making human rights, democracy, and religious freedom the pillars of a transformed Holy See diplomacy (Hehir, 1990, p.

36). On top of this, he proposed a revisionist international vision grounded in the criticism of neocolonialism, abolition of nuclear weapons, and principles of solidarity, dignity, and justice, as highlighted in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (John Paul II, 1987, paras 1-4). Therefore, it became evident that since the end of WWII, the Holy See had transformed from a reactive and ideologically aligned actor to a proactive moral authority, becoming increasingly relevant in the international arena through the use of persuasion, soft diplomacy, and religious authority, which is still the case to this day.

In fact, not by chance, the Holy See currently has diplomatic relations with 183 sovereign states, including the partially internationally recognized Taiwan, in addition to the Sovereign Military Order of Malta and the State of Palestine (Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, 2025). Furthermore, it has a non-resident papal representative to Vietnam, formal contacts with Afghanistan, Brunei, Somalia, and Saudi Arabia (without proper diplomatic relations), and apostolic delegates to local Catholic Church communities working in unofficial capacities (Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, 2025). From a multilateral perspective, the religious polity has diplomatic ties with the European Union (EU) and participates in several international organizations, including the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), and many others (Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, 2025). Moreover, it has the status of permanent observer state in the United Nations (UN) and the World Health Organization (WHO), that of permanent observer in many IOs worldwide, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and maintains informal talks with several others (Permanent Observer Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations, 2025).

2.2 The Holy See as a Diplomatic Actor

2.2.1 Ambiguous Statehood

Following the traditional narrative, the Holy See has a unique position under international law, being a sui-generis polity claiming a dual legal personality as both the government of Vatican City State and the Catholic Church (Cismas, 2014, p. 153). In this way, it benefits from the attributes of statehood but complies with state-like duties only to a certain extent (Cismas, 2014, p. 153). In fact, it does not fulfill the traditional criteria of statehood as outlined in the 1933 Montevideo Convention, comprising four basic requirements of a state: permanent population, defined territory, government,

and capacity to enter into relations with other states (Cismas, 2014, p. 168). From this perspective, the Holy See, as the central governing body of the Catholic Church, does not have a territory nor a population per se: Vatican City State provides the Holy See with territorial sovereignty, but it is inhabited by a small and transient population, including the clergy, the Swiss guards, and diplomats (Cismas, 2014, pp. 169-171).

Furthermore, the religious polity has a governing structure consisting of the Pope (head of the Catholic Church and Sovereign of Vatican City State, holding legislative, executive, and judicial power, and appointing bishops, cardinals, and Curial officials), the Roman Curia assisting him, and apostolic nunciatures (Francis, 2022, art. 1-43). The curia is composed of the Secretariat of State (overseeing both internal and external affairs), sixteen dicasteries (each dealing with a different aspect of Church life and governance, e.g., Doctrine of the Faith), tribunals (such as the Supreme Tribunal of the Apostolic Signatura, i.e., the Church's highest court) and offices handling administrative, various financial and ceremonial functions (Francis, 2022, arts. 53-237). However, whether this structure is more ecclesiastical than traditionally governmental remains open to debate. The Montevideo Convention criteria are nevertheless met when it comes to external relations, as the Holy See maintains diplomatic relations with almost every single country in the world and participates in multilateral diplomacy (Cismas, 2014, p. 178).

As a consequence, several scholars have been debating the nature of the religious polity under international law for decades, with no consensus in sight. While some, like Araujo (2001, pp. 359-360), argue that the Holy See is much more than a faith-based movement and that its state-like international personality is thus justified, several others, like Morss (2015, p. 927), claim that neither the temporal power of the pope nor the sovereignty over Vatican City State ensures that the polity meets the criteria of modern statehood. In light of this ongoing debate regarding its legal status, the Holy See maintains permanent observer status in several international organizations, including the United Nations, where, despite being labeled as a "permanent observer state", it does not enjoy the same rights and privileges as full member states (Araujo, 2001, p. 345).

2.2.2 Legal Personality and Diplomatic Practice

Despite its debated statehood, international legal status is shaped by recognition and performance, and the Holy See is a recognized subject of international law since the 5th century, although the 1929 Lateran Pacts between Fascist Italy and the Holy See contributed to affirm its legal personality worldwide (Araujo, 2001, p. 322). These are often presented as three treaties: a treaty of conciliation,

recognizing the full sovereignty of the Holy See in the Vatican City State, a financial convention, and a concordat, regulating the future relations between the two (Cismas, 2014, pp. 166-167). On the one hand, the treaties granted the Holy See the restitution of a small portion of its former territory alongside financial compensation and also recognized Catholicism as the sole state religion, which was repealed in 1984; on the other hand, Italy managed to settle the Roman question after decades of dispute in an attempt to keep the Church by the country's side during those years (Pollard, 2010, pp. 42-47). Therefore, this was a solution that favored both parties, a win-win situation. However, Morss (2015, p. 927) criticized that while many elements in the treaties at the time indicated the municipal nature of the agreement (reinforced by the fact that within Vatican City, Italian laws apply as long as they are not incompatible with Vatican regulations), it came to have international legal standing. In other words, whereas at the time it was intended as a friendly way to put an end to a long-standing dispute between neighbors, foreign nations regarded it as the recognition of the religious polity internationally.

Furthermore, the Holy See is a member of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, ratified in 1964, a key international treaty defining the framework of independent countries' interaction (United Nations, 1961). This document is of utmost importance as it shows that from a diplomatic perspective, the religious polity occupies the same position as other signatory states. For instance, Article 1 defines the concepts of "sending state" and "head of mission", while Article 3 clarifies the functions of a diplomatic mission, including representing the sending state, negotiating with the receiving state, and promoting friendly relations (United Nations, 1961, arts. 1&3). This reinforces the concept that, as a signatory, the Holy See fulfills all diplomatic functions and its representatives are second to none. On the contrary, nuncios have the same standing as ambassadors, falling under class 1, as per Article 14, and often even hold dean-of-corps precedence, although this is not always the case (United Nations, 1961, art. 14). In fact, according to Article 16:

> Heads of mission shall take precedence in their respective classes in the order of the date and time of taking up their functions in accordance with Article 13 […] without prejudice to any practice accepted by the receiving State regarding the precedence of the representative of the Holy See. (United Nations, 1961, art. 16)

The last clause thus allows countries to give the nuncio precedence, making him dean of the diplomatic corps but without imposing it as a rule. In the real world, this translates into three different scenarios today: in catholic-majority states the nuncio is the dean, following historical custom since the 1815 Congress of Vienna; in secular or mixed-religion states, the two often coincide, with custom maintaining the tradition; in non-Catholic states, precedence and deanship is accorded based on the

date of credential presentation, making the nuncio equal to other ambassadors (Monod de Froideville & Verheul, 2021, p. 44). On top of this, as per Articles 22-29, all diplomats of the adhering states, including those of the Holy See, have been granted certain privileges and immunities covering the inviolability of missions, documents, archives, etc. while in the exercise of their functions (United Nations, 1961, arts. 22-29). This shows once again how the religious polity is a fully participating diplomatic actor under international law.

2.2.3 The Holy See Diplomatic Structure

The Holy See diplomatic corps is very unique in nature as it represents a combination of positions present in secular counterparts, as well as unique figures. The point of departure of this section is the Secretariat of State namely the central office of papal diplomacy, the largest of the sixteen dicasteries of the Holy See, dealing with a wide variety of subjects, mostly religious, in constant consultation with the Pontiff, to ensure the well-being of the Catholic Church, over which he has full jurisdiction (Araujo & Lucal, 2010, pp. 43-45; Lajolo, 2005, p. 7). This body is presided by the Secretary of State and is currently divided into two sections: the first one for General Affairs, addressing the daily service of the Pope and coordination of the other dicasteries, and the second one for Relations with States, equivalent to secular ministries for foreign affairs, dealing with heads of states and governments, fostering external relations and the well-being of the Catholic Church abroad (Araujo & Lucal, 2010, pp. 43-45; Lajolo, 2005, pp. 8-9).

Moving on to the structure and ranks of papal representatives abroad, i.e., the papal exercise of the active right of legation, the first roles to be discussed are those of the heads of ordinary and permanent missions. Nowadays, the highest rank in existence for the Holy See diplomats is the apostolic nuncio, a prelate sent by the Sovereign Pontiff as the diplomatic representative of the Holy See to a foreign state belonging to the first class of diplomats (i.e., ambassadors) and often enjoying deanship in diplomatic bodies (Araujo & Lucal, 2010, p. 44). In the past similar roles were occupied also by pro-nuncios and internuncios for different reasons, but were later phased out: the former shared the same specifics as the nuncio except the deanship with this role being created especially after 1965 for the Holy See representations in those non-Christian countries struggling with the precedence of the nuncios on the one hand but refusing to accept only second-rank diplomats like the inter-nuncios; the latter was instead a second-rank diplomatic representative, similar to a minister plenipotentiary in secular states, sent by the Holy See where it was not possible to send first-rank diplomats, mainly in South America, but it was also gradually discontinued (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012, pp. 213, 301;

Broglio, 2015, p. 303). Therefore, to this day, the highest-ranking Holy See diplomats in every country are recognized as nuncios, making the clarification much easier than it used to be in the past.

Then comes the regent, a title that does not exist in secular diplomacy, appointed in case of a foreseen lengthy absence of first- or second-rank diplomats in the existing Holy See mission to a certain country, and ranking between a second- and third-rank diplomatic representatives (Cardinale, 1976, p. 146). Another unique role is that of the Apostolic Delegate, a prelate appointed by the Pontiff with a specific mission to a Catholic community abroad, usually without diplomatic status, focusing mainly on religious matters, who can nevertheless obtain temporary diplomatic status to address particular issues (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012; Broglio, 2015, p. 303). The next in line is the chargé d'affaires, a third-class diplomatic representative, who becomes the head of the mission in case of the absence of higher-rank diplomats, very much aligned with the tasks fulfilled by a secular chargé d'affaires, who can be either permanent (i.e., en pied) or provisional (ad interim) (Cardinale, 1976, pp. 146-147).

Besides the ordinary and permanent missions, there also exist the extraordinary ones, whose nature is once again specific to the religious polity, consisting of temporary delegations sent by the pope to a foreign location to represent him on specific religious or civil occasions of utmost importance (Cardinale, 1976, p. 150). These missions are led by a legate, usually a cardinal, of which there exist three types—legates *a latere*, cardinal legates, and other papal legates—where the first is a cardinal from the pope's entourage, charged by the Pontiff himself to be his alter ego abroad on a special mission and, in light of his very special role, should thus be treated by the host country like a true Sovereign in all matters; the second, although not part of the Roman Curia, is entrusted by the Pope to represent him at some important civil or religious event and retains the right to special honors during the fulfillment of his mission, albeit to a lesser extent than the legates *a latere*; and lastly, the mission may also be entrusted to nuncios, apostolic delegates, bishops, or archbishops when the circumstances do not require the presence of a papal legate (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012; Cardinale, 1976, pp. 150-151).

Lastly, the lower-ranked ecclesiastical members of the official staff of the papal diplomatic missions follow a career that is similar to their counterparts in secular diplomacy: attaché, secretary of second and then first class, and finally Counselor, with intervals of three years between each grade (Cardinale, 1976, pp. 175-177). Auditors of first and second class, corresponding to the senior first

secretary or deputy chancellor, existed but were eliminated, dating back to a time when the Holy See diplomatic personnel also worked as judges in the Spanish Rota (Broglio, 2015, pp. 310-311). All these officials, who must be priests under thirty-three years of age with a degree in Canon Law to qualify for a career in the Holy See diplomatic corps, are trained at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, the only institution of its kind (Stummvoll, 2018, chapter 3.2).

2.2.4 Powers and Customs of Holy See Diplomacy

Another important aspect of Holy See diplomacy is papal representatives' powers and customs, some of which are aligned with those of secular diplomats, while some are specific to the unique nature of the Holy See. These have historical roots but remain important to this day, including in the period after 1992, on which the thesis will focus. The first one to be discussed is the *agrément*, also known as *agréation*, namely the formal consent given by a receiving state to the appointment of a foreign ambassador, ruled by the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, according to which the sending state must ensure the agreement of the receiving state on the nomination with the latter being able to reject it without giving a proper explanation (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012, p. 9; United Nations, 1961, art. 4). From this perspective, the Holy See, as a signatory of said convention, conforms perfectly to the international standards of secular diplomacy by adhering to the aforementioned procedure. Another related crucial custom of diplomatic practices, secular as much as the Holy See, is the letter of credence, a formal document signed by the head of state (in this case, the Pope) accrediting the highest-ranking diplomat to a foreign government (Berridge & Lloyd, 2012, pp. 231-232). As regulated by Article 13 of the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, upon arrival, an apostolic nuncio presents the formal letter from the Pope to the head of state of the host country, usually in the presence of a formal audience (United Nations, 1961, art. 13).

Furthermore, while the questions of precedence and deanship were already discussed at length above, the question of the jurisdiction of papal representatives is of the utmost importance when discussing their powers. In fact, differently from their secular counterparts, Holy See diplomats operate with a dual mandate: diplomatic and ecclesiastical (Broglio, 2015, p. 302). The former is granted under international law through various treaties and enables them to negotiate and maintain state-level relations based on territorial jurisdiction, much like any other diplomatic corps in the world. (Broglio, 2015, p. 302). The latter is instead based on canon law and is unique to the Holy See, with its representatives exercising canonical oversight over the local church with tasks including facilitating the selection of bishops, acting as liaisons between the pope and the episcopal conference, and reporting on church life and challenges (Broglio, 2015, p. 302).

Moreover, an often-overlooked question concerns the nationality of papal representatives. On this aspect, the Vienna Convention affirms that except where otherwise agreed, "members of the diplomatic staff of the mission should in principle be of the nationality of the sending state" (United Nations, 1961, Art. 8). In the past, permanent nunciatures were traditionally reserved for Italian citizens due to the geographical position of the papal states, but with changing international circumstances, the Holy See wanted to conform as much as possible to the rules of international law and diplomacy (Witola, 2024, pp. 140-141). Therefore, around 1940, the pontiff started granting the citizenship of the Vatican City State to a limited number of people working for the religious polity, including representatives abroad in the exercise of their functions (Witola, 2024, pp. 132-137). To this day, the majority of Vatican diplomats retain their citizenship throughout their mandate, receiving a passport issued by the Holy See, which is aimed solely at fulfilling their duties (Witola, 2024, p. 134). Some of them may be required to temporarily renounce their native citizenship, only to reacquire it at the end of their service; even if they were to lose it permanently, they would automatically become Italian citizens at the end of their mandate (Witola, 2024, pp. 139-140). However, in an era of progress, globalization, and changes in civilizations, precautions have been taken with the 2011 Law N.CXXXI to ensure that this process takes place as smoothly as possible, bearing in mind the freedom of choice of the single individuals (Witola, 2024, p. 140).

Moreover, the matter of nationality is strictly related to the one of loyalty. One may assume that retaining the country of origin's nationality while fulfilling the functions of another polity may create a conflict of interest. However, this rarely happens and the reason is two-fold: firstly, Vatican representatives are seldom sent to represent the Holy See in their country of origin reducing the risk to the very minimum; secondly, the Holy See and the country of origin are not on the same plane internationally as secular diplomats represent national, territorially-related interests, while Vatican envoys swear to represent the religious mission and universal Church (Cardinale, 1976, 169-170). In other words, in light of the non-territorial nature of the Holy See, their loyalty is more spiritual, acting as messengers of the Pope's teachings, moral guidance, and ecclesial priorities, making the diplomacy of the religious polity once again unique. In this sense, it is indicative that, when discussing the qualities of a good Vatican diplomat, Alessandrini (1957, pp. 41-46) mentions that, first and foremost, they must be good priests, convinced of the superiority of spiritual values. In light of all this, it becomes evident that even though their de jure functions have to somehow conform to the existing narrative and norms of international law, their de facto powers go beyond and exceed what is on

paper: their mission is not just diplomatic but, as direct representatives of the Pope and his missions worldwide, they act as supranational guardians of the Catholic values.

2.3 Holy See Public Diplomacy and the Promotion of Catholic Values

2.3.1 The Holy See Approach to Public Diplomacy

In order to spread and protect these values and as a consequence of its unique identity, the Holy See has been increasingly relying on public diplomacy in recent years. The latter indeed has been playing a pivotal role in the image of the religious polity abroad and will be one of the main foci of this thesis, mainly in relation to the European Union. When public diplomacy first emerged in the 1960s, it was first defined as "the actions of governments to inform and influence foreign publics" (McDowell, 2008, p. 7). However, the definition expanded over the decades, and a much broader one is used today, including the transnational impact of all government or private activities with an impact on foreign policy, national security, trade, tourism, and other national interests (McDowell, 2008, p. 7). It typically involves a broad range of actors, both state and non-state, who use cultural, educational, and informational tools to shape perceptions, build trust, and promote dialogue across borders (McDowell, 2008, pp. 7-11). Public diplomacy is thus characterized by its focus on communication, its engagement with civil society, and its use of media, culture, education, and people-to-people exchanges (McDowell, 2008, pp. 7-11). The field of public diplomacy is thus an ever-expanding one, and Joseph Nye's (2004, p. 1) concept of soft power is at its core: influencing others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. This behavior is also often associated with the concept of track II diplomacy, a term coined by Montville and Davidson in 1981 to indicate the practice of non-state actors based on tactics of conflict resolution aimed at de-escalating the conflict between contentious groups (Ahmad, 2023, pp. 3-4). This definition emerged in contrast to track I diplomacy entailing formal governmental communication between parties, often conducted by professional diplomats behind closed doors; on the contrary, track II diplomacy is achieved through non-governmental, informal, and open contacts such as workshops and conversations and involves the work of NGOs, media, and religious actors, among others (Ahmad, 2023, p. 3-4).

From this perspective, the Holy See adopts a combination of track I and II diplomacies: on the one hand we have seen how Vatican diplomats engage in formal negotiations both bilaterally and multilaterally; on the other hand, the religious polity also collaborates informally with several members of the civil society worldwide including non-profit associations and faith groups to build consensus and promote values like peace, human dignity, and the common good (Tomasi, 2017, p. ix

and x). This duality is an intrinsic characteristic of this sui generis polity, which also shows that small polities can play a key role in the international arena, especially if acting as representatives of certain values (Matlary, 2001, p. 80). Therefore, it becomes evident that the Holy See cannot fulfill its spiritual mission without practicing public diplomacy, seeking to shape public opinion towards the aforementioned directions. Unlike secular entities, which represent national territorial, economic, and security interests and for which it is just another tool to use, value-based public diplomacy is essential for the religious polity embodying the universal values and morals of the Catholic Church (Matlary, 2001, p. 87).

Before delving deeper into the analysis of the Holy See public diplomacy strategies, a structural framework of its channels of communication will be detailed to better understand and situate the former. In this field, the Pontiff has always been the ultimate communicator, with his charisma always shaping the image of the Holy See worldwide, be it through speeches and encyclicals or by embarking on apostolic journeys to visit Catholic communities across the world (Matlary, 2001, p. 87). In this task, he is aided by the Secretariat of State, which also plays an important role: the section for Relations with States handles formal diplomatic communication, i.e., statements and treaties, while the one for General Affairs deals with interactions within the curia (Lajolo, 2005, pp. 8-9).

However, in the context of public diplomacy, an even more important position is occupied by the recently established Dicastery for Communication. As explained by Gęsiak (2017, pp. 5-6), before the beginning of the reform enacted by Pope Francis, Vatican media included several entities such as Vatican Radio, l'Osservatore Romano, CTV, and others, each with its own structure, and with poor horizontal communication, thus often resulting in overlap and misunderstandings. The renovation saw first the establishment of the Secretariat for Communication in 2015, followed by a period of consolidation where the new body took over several functions before being renamed Dicastery (Gęsiak, 2017, pp. 5-6). The establishment of an overseeing structure aimed to keep the Vatican up to speed with digitalization, improve coordination, and reduce costs, thus establishing a trans-media strategy, covering content in all formats (Gęsiak, 2017, pp. 5-6).

Therefore, for the period analyzed in this thesis, after the 1992 Maastricht treaty, the Holy See public diplomacy has been directed at a multi-level audience: national governments and international organizations (via traditional diplomacy), religious communities with clergymen acting as mediators, and the general public (both Catholic and non-Catholic world) (Tomasi, 2017, p. ix and x). This communication, founded on the principles of peace, human dignity, and dialogue, is structured in

different channels: some have evolved over the years while others remained the same (Gęsiak, 2017, pp. 5-6; Tomasi, 2017, pp. ix and x). On the one hand, the media only included traditional platforms at first, such as the news service, radio, and the official newspaper, with poor coordination. Starting in 2015, they underwent important structural changes, including the gradual integration of social media (Gęsiak, 2017, pp. 5-6). These have been coupled with more traditional means of doing public diplomacy by the Pontiff himself, namely through speeches, encyclicals, and public appearances worldwide (Matlary, 2001, p. 87).

2.3.2 Holy See Public Diplomacy in Action

Beyond the structural framework of the Holy See public diplomacy, it is essential to analyze what strategies are used in practice. The starting point consists precisely of the aforementioned apostolic journeys, on which many Pontiffs have embarked over the years with specific purposes. For instance, Pope Benedict XVI visited the symbolic Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the historical center of Orthodoxy between the 500s and 1400s, as part of his 2006 visit to Turkey, aimed, among other things, at the gradual reconciliation of the Catholic and Orthodox churches (Valenzano & Menegatos, 2008, p. 208). In fact, despite his aversion to interreligious dialogues with non-Christians, he made the rapprochement between these two Christian faiths one of the priorities of his papacy (Valenzano & Menegatos, 2008, pp. 208-209). The visit was also a consequence of the Regensburg speech controversy, where the Pontiff had quoted a Byzantine emperor's critical views of Islam, thus leading to widespread backlash in the Islamic world (Valenzano & Menegatos, 2008, p. 208). His successor, Francis, also embarked on several journeys worldwide, notably the one to Lampedusa in his first year as a pope, placing the spotlight on the deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean, an issue that was at the center of the political discussions back then, especially in the EU (Catania, 2015, pp. 465-469). In particular, the Pope requested that the tiny island off the coast of Sicily not spend money on his visit, and wanted to arrive on a coast guard's boat just as migrants did to open the eyes of the international community (Catania, 2015, p. 469). These are just two of the several examples of the countless implications and repercussions that apostolic journeys have on the international arena, especially from a moral and ethical perspective, thus representing one of the most effective tools of the Holy See public diplomacy.

Another important instrument used by the Pontiffs to appeal to the audience worldwide is papal encyclicals, a pastoral letter written by the Pope for the whole Roman Catholic Church, on matters of doctrine, morals, or discipline. During the period analyzed in this thesis, several of them were written over the years with different foci: John Paul II's 1995 *Evangelium Vitae* highlighted the value of

human life with consequent overt opposition to abortion and euthanasia; Benedict XVI's 2009 *Caritas in Veritate*, written in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, was more centered on the ethics of post-financial crisis; Francis' 2015 *Laudato Si* instead advocated for global attention on the environmental crisis, calling on the UN and climate summits to take action (Laputko, 2021, p. 58; McKim, 2019, pp. 5-7; Sison & Fontrodona, 2011, p. 99). These documents, and several others, were aimed at and partially managed to raise awareness about certain global issues, thus representing a pivotal public diplomacy tool in the hands of the Holy See today as much as in the past.

Furthermore, the Holy See can harness another essential tool as part of its public diplomacy strategies, namely neutrality: this value has characterized the polity's response to several crises worldwide over the years (Breger, 2022, p. xi-xii). In particular, ever since the 1929 Lateran Pacts, the Holy See and the Vatican City State were mandated to permanent neutrality but this was more of a benefit than a constraint becoming the vehicle through which it conducted diplomacy, enabling it to achieve four goals: protect its theology, advance milieu and possession goals, and allow for communication as well as autonomy (Cahill, 2022, pp. 179-181). In fact, during the period analyzed here, i.e., after 1992, the Holy See acted as a neutral mediator in several conflicts. Firstly, during the First Iraq War, it used its neutral status to heavily oppose the armed confrontation in the region, being particularly vocal about the local Catholic population, fearing that Arabs would hurt them (Cahill, 2022, pp. 193-194). Secondly, during the Second Iraq War, the Holy See made use of its neutral role to support the UN's opposition to the war, urging both parties to go through the universal international organization to settle their dispute, managing to establish a unique third camp, besides those pro- and anti-war (Cahill, 2022, pp. 193-194). Lastly, during the more recent Syrian conflict, the religious polity also tried to harness neutrality to achieve specific goals, namely those of respecting human dignity, protecting the Catholic communities in the region, and fostering interreligious dialogue leading to peace while rising above the parties (Cahill, 2022, pp. 193-194). Therefore, neutrality has always been a pivotal public diplomacy tool in the hands of the Holy See over the past century, and on several occasions after 1992, enabling the polity to make its voice heard in the international arena.

Lastly, an interesting interpretation of these events is that the Holy See rose to the occasion in times of crisis, trying to lead by example and epitomizing moral authority. This was also visible in some recent crises: "The image of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, solitary, standing and speaking to a rainy, dark, and empty square, is one of the historical scenes that will best represent the moment in which the world faces COVID-19" (Bertarelli & Amaral, 2020, p. 109). The Pope, despite his physical struggles and environmental darkness, wanted to send a message of hope (Bertarelli & Amaral, 2020, p. 109).

Although these attempts were not always successful, all these tools illustrate well how papal public diplomacy has been conducted over the past decades. What should be kept in mind, however, is that they are not used in a vacuum but constitute a means to an end: they are historically grounded in the system of values that the Holy See and Catholic Church have been striving to spread worldwide, and, in particular, in Catholic Social Teaching (Stummvoll, 2018, preface). The next section will thus explain in greater detail what this is and how it forms the underpinning of the Holy See international engagement.

2.3.3 The Holy See Normative Agenda: Catholic Social Teaching and its Dilemmas

Thus far, it has been explained how the Holy See utilizes its unique nature to act as a value-driven actor in the modern international arena; however, on what principles does it conduct the aforementioned public diplomacy? One doctrine that has been particularly influential in underpinning the global engagement of the Holy See and the Catholic Church over the past few decades is Catholic Social Teaching (CST) (Stummvoll, 2018, preface). CST is mostly concerned with human dignity and the common good in society, addressing mainly peace, war, oppression, social justice, wealth distribution, and the protection of family values (Stummvoll, 2018, chapter 3.1). Historically, this doctrine traces its roots back to Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, centered on the principle of redistribution in opposition to communism, and was later mentioned in several other similar documents, with the most recent 2020 Pope Francis' Popoli Tutti (Beckett, 2021, p. 7; Stummvoll, 2018, chapter 3.1). The fundamentals of the doctrine are laid out in Pope St John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961): "Individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so, for men are by nature social beings" (para. 219). In other words, this document affirms the superiority of people's dignity, which, in light of their inherent social nature, must be placed at the center of all institutions. Furthermore, CST promotes a vision based on natural law, common good, and moral interdependence, differing from other ideologies with a similar starting point (Beckett, 2021, p. 7).

However, CST is not just a simple doctrine: it has become a framework for understanding the Holy See public diplomacy and engagements with the international community. One of the fundamental pillars of the polity's PD is neutrality: while being non-partisan and non-national, CST has enabled the Holy See neutral voice to become distinctly moral over the decades, especially in favor of oppressed Catholic communities abroad (Stummvoll, 2018, chapter 3.3). Papal personality also matters: each pope since 1992 has translated CST into their global version, drawing attention to different issues to advocate for. Pope John Paul II (1978-2005) centered the Holy See public

diplomacy on the defense of human rights, peacebuilding, and labor rights by addressing the UN General Assembly and writing encyclicals like the 1991 *Centesimus Annus* (Stummvoll, 2018, chapter 3.3; Weigel, 2020, pp. 346-347). His successor, Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013), concentrated on highlighting the spiritual foundation of human rights and religious freedom while calling on the international community to ensure ethical globalization and human development (O'Connor, 2020, p. 366). Lastly, Pope Francis shifted the attention to the issues of environmental and migrant crises, trying to foster a feeling of global fraternity and social fraternity, very much in line with his Franciscan background, as was particularly evident in *Laudato Si* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020) (Catania, 2015, pp. 465-469; McKim, 2019, pp. 5-7). These are all different variations of the CST doctrine, based on the protection of the individuals as social foundations of the community, thus providing an ethical foundation for the Holy See to engage internationally.

The values of CST are closely connected to the Holy See public diplomacy as they are spread worldwide through the same channels described above. The main tools include, once again, papal encyclicals, apostolic journeys, speeches at multinational fora, and coordinated media outreach led by the Dicastery of Communication (Tomasi, 2017, pp. ix-x; Gęsiak, 2017, pp. 5–6). Encyclicals, translated into multiple languages and made accessible through both digital and traditional platforms, are widely circulated among religious communities, NGOs, and international policymakers and are often referenced in debates on human rights, development, and environmental ethics (Beckett, 2021, p.7; Tomasi, 2017, pp. ix–x). Apostolic visits serve as another powerful diplomatic channel: they are often planned in response to current global crises and framed to convey CST-based messages, such as Pope Francis's 2013 visit to Lampedusa, highlighting the humanitarian tragedy of Mediterranean migration and reflecting CST's emphasis on the dignity of the human person (Catania, 2015, pp. 465–469). These instruments thus allow the Holy See to target a multi-level audience composed of governments, international organizations, Catholic institutions, civil society actors, and the general public. The integration of traditional teachings with modern communication strategies illustrates how CST is operationalized not merely as doctrine but as a framework for global engagement and value-driven public diplomacy (Stummvoll, 2018, chapter 3.3).

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However, its application worldwide is not without criticism. In fact, navigating the current global landscape, composed of complex political realities and multifaceted cultural systems, is challenging for any traditional secular state, let alone for a unicorn like the Holy See. Therefore, its value-based diplomacy has been facing some limitations, which will be explored in this section, focusing on the most relevant ones for the period analyzed here. The first tension often highlighted in the literature is

the one between the polity's moral authority and political realities. As explained by Troy (2018), the Holy See diplomats operate "at the intersections of political and religious modes of agency and substantial and relational conceptions of international politics" (p. 521). This means that, while in certain situations they have more room for compromise compared to secular states, their soft power approach can struggle when facing authoritarian regimes, focused on hard power and realpolitik.

The second issue often raised by critics of the Holy See CST value-based diplomacy concerns its selectivity and inconsistency. In fact, it is frequently argued that, while the polity advocates strongly for some matters dear to its heart, like religious freedom and the inviolability of human life, it remains relatively silent to others such as gender equality and women's role in the Church (Radford Ruether, 2008, p. 184). This is mostly due to the historical gender subordination rooted in the Catholic traditions, starting with St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, with women being thus always excluded from the priesthood and Church leadership (Radford Ruether, 2008, pp. 184-185). Today, this is reflected in the Church's opposition to feminist movements, campaigns for civil rights, birth control, and abortion access, exemplified by the global campaign against reproductive rights launched by the Vatican under John Paul II (Radford Ruether, 2008, p. 188). The global approach of the Holy See toward this specific matter has remained relatively unchanged, and its selective focus on certain issues can thus undermine its reputation as impartiality- and dignity-based actor in the international arena.

The third major tension that often emerges in the Holy See CST-based international engagement, in the past as much as in recent decades, is between spreading an evangelizing message and conducting diplomacy. As explained by Troy (2018, p. 521), the religious polity operates with a "hybrid mode of agency", at the crossroads between traditional diplomatic roles and ecclesiastical functions. This inevitably results in a clash between its highly moral spiritual authority and the pressure to conform to international standards to be able to maintain bilateral and multilateral ties like secular entities, which leads to it being seen as a "stranger" in international relations, blurring the lines between religion and diplomacy (Troy, 2018, p. 521). When it comes to balancing evangelization with diplomatic impartiality, this tension becomes particularly evident, leading authors like Troy (2008, p. 209) to claim that the Holy See faith-based diplomacy does not fit into track I nor track II, but consists of a sui-generis track 1.5, blending religious values with statecraft. Therefore, while the Holy See strives to navigate this complex intersection, spreading its values and respecting the pluralism of international politics at the same time can be an arduous task. Despite greater emphasis on universal values and global fraternity and sisterhood, especially under Francis, the polity's diplomacy is often seen as inherently confessional due to its religious roots.

CHAPTER 3: THE EUROPEAN UNION BETWEEN GLOBAL IDENTITY AND INTEREST REPRESENTATION

The European Union represents a complex and sui generis international actor whose role in global affairs is increasingly shaped by its identity, institutional evolution, and normative ambitions. While the EU's institutional architecture and political foundations differ significantly from those of the Holy See, both actors engage in a diplomacy that prioritizes values, dialogue, and multilateral engagement. Though the comparison must remain carefully qualified, it serves as a useful analytical lens to understand how these two peculiar actors in international relations can nonetheless exert influence on the global stage, especially through soft power and norm promotion. In this respect, both the EU and the Holy See offer alternative models of diplomatic engagement, relying less on force and more on legitimacy, persuasion, and transnational networks. With that being said, the focus of this chapter is twofold: first, on the European Union as a global actor by examining the evolution of its external action, the competing visions of its international identity, as well as the actors and strategies characterizing its public diplomacy; and second, on the mechanisms of interest representation within the EU. Understanding both these dynamics is crucial to assessing how and where the Holy See fits into the Union's evolving external action and institutional landscape, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

3.1 The EU as a Global Actor: Evolution and Theories of Identity of EU External Action

The first step will thus focus on the analysis of the identity of the EU's global engagement drawing attention to three aspects: the evolution of the EU's external action since its inception; the competing visions of the Union's international identity, delving into an analysis of what kind power it has been, is and strives to be; and the public diplomacy strategies in the EU's foreign policy, discussing the transmission of its identity to the audience worldwide.

3.1.1 The Evolution of the EU's External Action

While this thesis focuses primarily on the period following the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, it is still important to briefly trace the earlier evolution of the European Union's external action to contextualize its post-Maastricht development and to highlight the continuity and transformation of

its international ambitions, similar to what was done with the evolution of the Holy See diplomacy in Chapter 2.

Ever since its foundation in the aftermath of World War II, the European Union has undergone constant evolution, achieving several goals along the way, and has become the sui generis international organization it is today (Dinan, 2014, pp. 23-24; Liargovas & Papageorgiou, 2024, pp. 1-3; Pinder & Usherwood, 2013, chapter 2). In fact, the Union is more than a traditional international organization, but less than a federal state like the US, thus representing a unique entity between intergovernmentalism and supranationalism: its hybrid institutional structure allows it to exercise binding legislative power over its member states in areas like trade and the single market while still requiring unanimous intergovernmental decision-making in sensitive domains like foreign policy and security (Boşilcă, 2014, p. 31; Peročević, 2017, pp. 114- 116). This duality is clearly reflected in its external role, which exceeds that of many other IOs but lacks a fully-fledged legal framework for maintaining inter-state relations, despite recent streamlining changes brought by the 2009 Treaty of Lisbon (Boşilcă, 2014, p. 31).

As a matter of fact, its engagement with the rest of the world has undergone several changes over the past decades. As is evident from the 1950 Schuman Declaration, the European Coal and Steel Community emerged as a response to the damages, destruction, and horror caused by the two global conflicts in the first half of the 20th century, forging an identity grounded in reconstruction, interdependence, and diplomatic solutions that deliberately avoided hard power (Dinan, 2014, pp. 45–48; Liargovas & Papageorgiou, 2024, pp. 1-3; Pinder & Usherwood, 2013, chapter 1). However, it should not be forgotten that the idea of hard power, i.e., European military integration, was not entirely absent, at least in the very beginning. In fact, in 1952, the six founding members of the EU (namely Italy, France, West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg) signed the Treaty establishing the European Defense Community (EDC), also known as the Treaty of Paris, aimed at creating a supranational European army under a single political and military authority, in response to the US demands for German rearmament (Griffiths, 2020, p. 1). Nevertheless, the project ultimately collapsed in 1954 when the French National Assembly refused to put the treaty to a vote, due to a fear of remilitarized Germany after WWII, loss of national sovereignty to the EU, as well as domestic political instability, thereby blocking ratification (Griffiths, 2020, p. 1). As a result, European integration shifted away from military ambitions.

The 1960s marked another important stage in the evolution of the EU's external action. During this decade, the European Economic Community expanded its presence on the global stage through institutionalized development cooperation. A key example was the Yaoundé I Convention (1963), under which the EEC established trade and aid partnerships with 18 newly independent African states, marking a first step towards a structured external development policy (Sakr, 2021, p. 449). Concurrently, France pursued the Fouchet Plans (1961–62), an intergovernmental proposal aiming to establish a "Union of States" for coordinated foreign and defense policy alongside the Communities (Teasdale, 2016, Abstract). Although this initiative collapsed due to resistance from other member states, it nonetheless signaled a growing awareness of the need for a unified European voice in international affairs, which will be a recurrent theme in the following years (Teasdale, 2016, Abstract). These developments reveal how the EU laid the foundations for its subsequent external engagement and identity in the 1960s, navigating foreign policy beyond internal economic integration.

Building on the external partnerships initiated in the 1960s, the European Economic Community (EEC) in the 1970s continued to deepen its international role through development cooperation. Not by chance, its subsequent international engagement became centered on the promotion of cooperation, peace, and multilateralism, rather than traditional military means (Duchêne, 1973, pp. 1-3, 15). In particular, in those years, the EEC began to establish itself not only as a trading bloc but also as an actor fostering social and economic development worldwide, thanks to its external aid policy, as was demonstrated by the 1975 Lomé Convention (Sakr, 2022, p. 1). This was an agreement between the EEC and 71 African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) countries, providing these countries with duty-free agricultural and mineral exports entry into the European market (based on a quota system) as well as 3 billion euros in aid and investment (Council of the European Communities, 1975). In parallel with these instruments, this decade marked the foundation of the EU's foreign policy coordination through the European Political Cooperation (EPC), the informal and intergovernmental FP arm of the Community, partially inspired by the Fouchet Plan (Hill et al., 2023, p. 30; Nuttall, 1992, p. 30). It was launched in 1970, after more than twenty years of debate, with the Luxembourg/Davignon Report (based on the directives issued by the 1969 Hague Summit), and was aimed at avoiding the institutional conflicts that had prevented the creation of a unified economic and foreign policy before (Hill, 2023, p. 30; Nuttall, 1992, p. 1). The process was further developed through the Copenhagen Report (1973), which consolidated the achievements of the EPC up to that point (Hill, 2023, p. 31; Nuttall, 1992, p. 51).

During the 1980s, the EPC framework became more structured and politically significant. After a period of slow progress in the late 1970s, the EPC was shaken by the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and the inability of the Community to react meaningfully, leading to both a revision of its working methods culminating in the 1981 London Report and the launching of a movement which would result in the adoption of the 1983 Stuttgart Solemn Declaration, reaffirming member states' commitment to EPC and endorsing the long-term goal of creating a European Union (Hill, 2023, pp. 31-33; Nuttall, 1992, p. 149). Subsequently, the 1986 Single European Act (SEA) provided, for the first time, a treaty-based legal framework for the EPC, formally integrating foreign policy coordination into the broader Community structure, which, despite remaining intergovernmental and distinct from the EEC's supranational institutions, represented a significant step toward constructing a shared international identity and laid the groundwork for the later establishment of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in the 1990s (Nuttall, 1992, p. 239).

On that note, the 1990s marked a period of institutionalization of the EU's External Action, starting with the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, defined by Dinan (2014, p. 220) as "the greatest milestone in the history of European integration". Among other things, the agreement introduced the Common Foreign and Security Policy, as part of the second pillar, in an attempt to establish a coordinated external policy among member states (Dinan, 2014, p. 243). This was part of a broader institutional reform based on a three-pillar structure, dividing the EU competences across different areas. Foreign policy thus became regulated through both the first and second pillars: supranational policy fields such as trade, development cooperation, and external economic relations were included in the first pillar, where decisions were made through the Community method, that is, the Commission proposed legislation which was then adopted by the European Parliament and the Council as co-legislators, often by qualified majority. (Fiszer, 2023, pp. 13-14). In contrast, more politically sensitive issues, including the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), fell under the second pillar, which was governed by the intergovernmental method, requiring unanimity among member states (Fiszer, 2023, pp. 13-14).

It was only after this huge achievement that the EU turned its attention to the Central and Eastern European states, using enlargement as a foreign policy tool for the first time with the establishment of the Copenhagen criteria for accession, following the 1993 European Council meeting in Copenhagen (Dinan, 2014, p. 258). In particular, the following conditions were established to join the Union: stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and respect for and protection of minorities, a functioning market economy, the ability to assume the obligations of

membership, and the Union's capacity to absorb new members (Dinan, 2014, p. 258). Following this evolution, under the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam, the role of the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was established, with former NATO Secretary General Javier Solana being appointed as the first HR (Dinan, 2014, p. 295). However, this figure was still mostly intergovernmental in nature, with no control over the external politics of the Commission, thus creating a high degree of fragmentation (Dinan, 2014, p. 295).

However, important changes came with the new millennium. A stepping stone in this timeframe was the 2003 European Security Strategy (ESS), drafted under the aforementioned HR Javier Solana, considered the first comprehensive strategic document, setting an overarching framework for the whole of EU External Action (Biscop, 2016, p. 15). Its goal was to promote effective multilateralism, peace, and the normative power of the EU, emphasizing the entity's global responsibility (Council of the European Union, 2003, pp. 7-9). This was later renewed in 2007 with the same premises but applied to a less stable international environment due to new threats like cyber-attacks and energy security (Council of the European Union, 2008, pp. 3-6).

Then came another pivotal moment for the institutionalization of the EU's external action, i.e., the 2009 Lisbon Treaty. In fact, thanks to this agreement, the European External Action Service (EEAS) was created, and the role of the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy was broadened, with a double-hat role as Vice-President of the European Commission and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council (Dinan, 2014, p. 313). These measures aimed to unify the EU's external voice, especially on diplomacy, security, and development.

The 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea marked the beginning of a significant shift in the EU's foreign and security posture. In response, the Union introduced a series of sanctions, still in place to this day, such as asset freezes and travel bans, aimed at punishing Russia without affecting its core sectors like energy, on which the EU used to depend heavily (Pelayo, 2023, p. 79). Although it felt like a huge step at the time, they pale in comparison to the measures imposed after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, with those in 2014 thus representing what scholars call a second-order change: tactical adaptation without a fundamental shift in strategic orientation (DeBardeleben, 2023, p. 3). The EU also formally declared the annexation illegal, continuously calling on Russia to de-escalate and respect Ukraine's sovereignty (Przetacznik & Tothova, 2022, pp. 1-2).

These developments exposed the EU's limited strategic capacity and directly contributed to the redefinition of its foreign policy vision, culminating in the adoption of the 2016 EU Global Strategy (EUGS), under Federica Mogherini as HR. Through this document, the Union's international engagement shifted from norm exportation to principled pragmatism. It emphasized the importance of resilience, strategic autonomy, and flexible foreign policy (European External Action Service, 2016, pp. 7–11). This represented a more comprehensive response to the external challenges the Union was facing, compared to the ESS, which had nevertheless laid the foundations a decade earlier. To demonstrate this, it is interesting to note what Tocci (2017) wrote as the leading pen-holder of the latest document on the differences between EES and EUGS. While the former was written by Solana in his "only" capacity as the EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the Union, Mogherini could take advantage of a broader perspective thanks to the double hat role entrusted to her by the Lisbon Treaty (Tocci, 2017, p. 3). This was reflected in the EUGS, which extended to all aspects of foreign policy, being not only limited to security, and included a wider variety of stakeholders beyond governments, such as academia, civil society, think tanks, etc. (Tocci, 2017, p. 3).

This shift was further intensified by the 2022 full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, which marked a decisive turning point in the EU's geopolitical posture: not only did we witness the first-ever financing of military aid to a non-EU country via the European Peace Facility but the enlargement process was revived with the Union opening accession negotiations with Ukraine (Koval & Vachudova, 2024, p. 135). The attention was thus being drawn again to the importance of defense cooperation, as is also highlighted in the introduction of the Strategic Compass (European External Action Service, 2022, pp. 4-10). In other words, to face contemporary challenges, the EU could no longer ignore greater integration in this field, which had long been overlooked, due to its sensitivity to member states. The more recent evolution of this trend is Readiness 2030 (formerly known as ReArm Europe), a strategic defense initiative proposed by the current European Commission President Von der Leyen, aimed at enhancing the Union's military capabilities following the shifting global landscape and a perceived decline in long-term US commitments to Europe (Clapp et al., 2025, p. 1; European Commission, 2024, pp. 2-3). In particular, the plan calls for an increase in European defense spending and emphasizes the need to improve the sector's infrastructure, seeking to mobilize up to €800 billion, and €150 billion for joint procurement, potential redirection of cohesion funds, and expanded European Investment Bank support (Clapp et al., 2025, p. 1). This shift marks a departure from the Commission's political role under Juncker (2014-2019), which was more focused on internal government reforms aimed at overcoming austerity and addressing European challenges

(Kassim & Laffan, 2019, p. 49). On the contrary, Von der Leyen chose to give a more geopolitical blueprint, aiming to make the Union more assertive on the international stage. These latest developments demonstrate an evolution of the EU's image and its external action, initially shifting towards a more pragmatic, resilient, and security-driven global identity while maintaining its core values.

Taken together, these developments point to the construction of a hybrid international identity for the EU, balancing its original normative aspirations with the emerging geopolitical and strategic necessities. This evolution thus underscores the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of the identity of this polity, which remains normatively post-national but is becoming increasingly attuned to the strategic demands of a turbulent international environment. As will be seen in the next paragraph, this duality is also mirrored in the theories that have been developed by scholars over the years to explain the EU's international identity. However, before delving into that aspect, a final caveat is in order: while this section has largely focused on institutional milestones and policy shifts, it is important to acknowledge that identity formation does not automatically follow institutional change; rather, it emerges gradually through contested interpretations, symbolic practices, and external perceptions that accompany or sometimes diverge from legal-institutional reforms. Understanding this layered identity is key to analyzing how the EU interacts with other global normative actors, including the Holy See.

3.1.2 Competing Visions of the Union's International Identity

This section now turns the attention to the main theoretical frameworks that scholars have used to interpret the Union's evolving international identity. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but rather offer complementary insights into how the EU behaves internationally, namely the tools it uses, the principles that guide its actions, and how its role is perceived globally. Understanding these models is particularly relevant for this thesis, as they also help explain how external actors, such as the Holy See, interpret and engage with the EU. Whether the Union is seen primarily as a civilian, normative, or market power, each vision carries implications for how the Holy See positions itself diplomatically, frames its dialogue with EU institutions, and navigates areas of shared concern such as peacebuilding, development, and human rights.

The first theory to be analyzed here is Civilian Power Europe (CPE), put forward for the first time by the aforementioned François Duchêne in 1973 to describe the EU's global role. According to the author, the Union's ability to promote peace, economic interdependence, and institutional

cooperation, thus avoiding military confrontation, constitutes its main strength (Duchêne, 1973, pp. 19-20). The approach considers the EU's external action as one based on the following pillars: an economic-centered foreign policy strategy, diplomacy-based multilateralism, long-term conflict prevention, and a post-national identity, i.e., one that goes beyond countries' borders and is not forgetful of the war-torn past (Duchêne, 1973, pp. 19-20). Today, this theory is still relevant since the EU's contemporary foreign policy posture reflects these values in certain policy areas, such as trade agreements with third countries, e.g., the EU-Mercosur Partnership Agreement, where the Union acts as a true civic power.

However, this view came under heavy criticism, particularly by the realist school and Hedley Bull, for different reasons. Firstly, he claimed that the EU should not have been considered an independent actor in world politics at the time, i.e., during the Cold War, because while it was rising fast economically, it was still entirely dependent on the US and NATO militarily (Bull, 1982, pp. 151-152). Secondly, he argued that strategic interests still mattered, dismissing the idea that military power could be entirely replaced by economic or moral ones (Bull, 1982, pp. 151-152). Therefore, he suggested at the time that the EU should have developed greater, self-sufficient traditional capacities, either through NATO or on its own, to make its voice heard by its transatlantic counterpart, to face the enduring Soviet threat, and to ensure its own future regeneration (Bull, 1982, pp. 152-157). The realist view has gained particular traction following the most recent crises, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the advent of the second Trump presidency, pushing the EU towards greater strategic and military autonomy.

Realism and Bull were later criticized by Ian Manners back in 2002, who introduced a third option, namely Normative Power Europe (NPE). According to this author, the Union's global role should not be conceived only in civic or military terms, but, in addition to these two, it should also be considered as a normative one (Manners, 2002, p. 235). This is because, following its historical development, hybrid polity, and constitutional nature, the Union came to acquire a "normatively different basis for its relations with the world" (Manners, 2002, p. 252). In particular, the five major norms associated with the EU are: peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights (Manners, 2002, p. 242). These are diffused through various mechanisms: contagion (i.e., unintentionally by EU's existence and example), informational diffusion (i.e., via EU strategic communications like declarations and speeches), procedural diffusion (through the institutionalization of relations between EU and external actors), transference (i.e., via material exchanges), overt diffusion (i.e., through physical presence of EU representatives abroad) and the cultural filter (i.e., social context, local

identity and history influencing norm reception in the receiving state) (Manners, 2002, p. 244-245). The author later refined his theory in subsequent works, emphasizing the possibility for strategic interests and normative power to co-exist with one another and the contributions of political psychology to understand the impact of emotions on EU foreign policy norms (Manners, 2011, pp. 226-227; 2021, pp. 193-194). While CPE could be seen as the precursor of NPE, the two are distinct and place the focus on different elements: while the former draws attention to the economic and diplomatic tools used by the European Union to become a civic power on the global stage, i.e., how it acts, the latter is more centered around the purpose of the EU's international engagement, i.e. why it acts, namely norm diffusion.

NPE would not be a theory without its critics. Firstly, the realist critique claims that NPE ignores power politics and strategic interests which played a key role in the formation of the EU foreign policy: bipolarity caused the emergence of the EEC and the evolution of ESDP is strictly linked to the systemic changes in the structural distribution of power, with the Union thus being used by its member states to advance their external interests through hard and soft power (Hyde-Price, 2006, p. 217). Furthermore, NPE has been criticized by Diez (2013, p. 194), representative of the hegemonic critique, who identifies four core problems: firstly, the theory draws too clear a line between norms and interests which is empirically untenable considering that EU foreign policy adopts a blend of the two; secondly, the EU is sometimes inconsistent in its promotion of norms abroad, e.g. when promoting democratic values but tolerating authoritarian allies, although, according to the author, this is simply the consequence of the contested nature of certain norms and not necessarily hypocrisy; thirdly, the NPE draws attention to EU institutions and member states for the most part, overlooking the importance of social forces like NGOs, and businesses, in norm diffusion; lastly, NPE is riddled with theoretical ambiguity: is it a description, explanation, or a normative ideal to be attained? (Diez, 2013, pp. 196-199). In light of these perceived flaws, the author proposes an alternative based on the Gramscian concept of hegemony: normative power should be seen as part of the hegemonic struggles over meaning and legitimacy, with EU FP not centered around a fixed set of values but multilayered contested norms (Diez, 2013, pp. 205-206). This would allow for a better account of power relations, contradictions, and political dynamics of the EU's international engagement (Diez, 2013, pp. 205-206).

Much like for CPE, recent crises like the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the rise of authoritarian regimes worldwide have demonstrated the limitations of using the normative approach alone to understand the EU's role on the international stage. In this sense, the ongoing shift towards principled

pragmatism already evident in the 2016 EU Global Strategy and 2022 EU Strategic Compass, centered around strategic autonomy and defense cooperation, demonstrates how normative and strategic directions can and have been going hand in hand recently (Palm, 2021, p. 3). Therefore, while NPE is no longer sufficient on its own, it would be wrong to assume that it has no explanatory power anymore. In fact, it remains a pivotal theory to analyze the Union's current global role, underlying its principled pragmatism and informing its self-perception and external perception, especially in certain geographic areas like the MENA region (Colombo, 2021, p. 1).

The last major theory that will be discussed in this section is Market Power Europe (MPE), first developed by Chad Damro in 2012. According to the view put forward by this author, the external power of the EU is not generated through its economic-diplomatic relations, military force, or normative impetus but through the externalization of its internal market rules and regulations (Damro, 2012, pp. 683-684). The three pillars of MPE are: the material existence of the EU single market, i.e. the largest advanced industrialized market in the world, granting the Union leverage over external actors; the presence of EU institutional features comprising strong regulatory institutions, like the Commission, the European Parliament, etc., which make it akin to a regulatory state endowed with coherence, expertise, and sanctioning ability, thus enabling rule externalization; and the Union interest contestation mechanism including competing interest groups influencing its regulatory impacts and external outreach (Damro, 2012, pp. 686-689). In particular, this is usually a two-stage process, either through persuasive or coercive means: first, EU actors attempt to get external parties to behave according to their market-related policies and regulatory measures; then, said targets adhere to that specific set of behaviors (Damro, 2012, pp. 689-691).

Today, this theory is still very relevant as the EU has produced several standards in a wide variety of fields that have been adopted globally, such as the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM), at first promoted to ensure compatibility across EU member states mobile networks and later becoming the dominant global mobile standard (Damro, 2012, p. 695). This theory is also supported by Anu Bradford in his 2020 book on the so-called Brussels effect, i.e., the EU's unilateral power to regulate global markets. In fact, the Union "has the ability […] to promulgate regulations that shape the global business environment, elevating standards worldwide and leading to a notable Europeanization of many important aspects of global commerce" (Bradford, 2020, *Abstract*). However, he warns against the upcoming challenges it may face in the near future, notably the growth of anti-EU sentiment, started with Brexit, the rise of China and other emerging powers eroding the

Union's market power, technological changes, and the decline of multilateral institutions and international cooperation (Bradford, 2020, pp. 265-266).

Ultimately, these competing visions of the EU's international identity offer valuable frameworks to understand the evolving character of its external engagement. However, it is worth noting that in spite of its formal secular nature, the Union's foundational values can be traced to deeper cultural and religious roots, particularly Christian-democratic traditions that shaped early integration, as also highlighted by John Paul II (2003, para. 108) in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*. In particular, the ideas of reconciliation, solidarity, and moral responsibility, which were central to post-war European identity-building, resonate strongly with Christian ethics. This cultural dimension has thus contributed to the normative underpinnings of EU foreign policy and helps explain how value-driven actors such as the Holy See perceive and engage with the Union.

3.1.3 The Public Diplomacy in the EU's Foreign Policy: Actors and Strategies

Having analyzed the evolution and different theories underpinning the EU's international engagement, it is now pivotal to examine how they are operationalized through public diplomacy (PD), understood as the strategic communication of values and policies to foreign publics, as outlined in Chapter 2, with the focus remaining on the period following the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht. This step is crucial for this thesis investigating the interplay between the EU and the Holy See, with both actors striving to shape global discourses through normative initiatives and soft power. Delving deeper into the Union's public diplomacy is thus instrumental to see how the polity projects its image abroad in practice, engaging with other value-driven actors like the Holy See.

To fully understand the architecture of EU public diplomacy since 1992, it is first essential to examine the roles of individual actors involved in shaping and implementing external communication strategies. In the pre-Lisbon phase, i.e., before 2009, the external representation system was very fragmented: the Commission was the principal leader of EU public diplomacy and normative outreach, operating through its Directorate General for External Relations (DG Relex) and a wide network of external delegations (Duke, 2013, pp. 117- 118; Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018, p. 39). These functioned at first as proto-diplomatic missions actively promoting trade, development, humanitarian aid services, and the broader projection of EU values and despite a gradual increase in their institutionalization, their structure remained fragmented across policy domains due to the lack of overarching authority of DG Relex over all facets of external action (Duke, 2013, pp. 117- 118; Morgenstern-Pomorski, 2018, p. 39). During this period, the Commission conducted public

diplomacy relying increasingly on development instruments such as the European Development Fund and the European Neighborhood Policy, cultural diplomacy programs like Erasmus+, as well as strategic communication initiatives involving EU citizens, including those abroad, like the "Plan D for democracy, dialogue and debate", serving as channels to diffuse norms and build legitimacy towards external audiences (Council of the European Union, 2024; D'Alfonso, 2014, pp. 6-7; European Commission, 2005, pp. 2-4; European External Action Service, 2021). The majority of these programs are still active to this day, making the Commission still a relevant actor in modern EU PD, also thanks to its funding of several think tanks serving as intellectual multipliers of EU values both domestically and abroad (Bajanova, 2023, p. 200). This fragmentation was further reinforced by the EU's pillarized institutional structure following Maastricht, the parallel involvement of the Council Secretariat (represented most visibly by High Representative Javier Solana and his network of special representatives and spokespersons) and the rotating Council presidency, which often devoted substantial public diplomacy resources to advancing its own national priorities during each six-month term (Duke, 2013, pp. 117, 124).

However, the 2009 Lisbon Treaty led to the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), coordinating the work of the EU delegations abroad under the leadership of the HRVP; this body thus took over the majority of the external public diplomacy functions of the EU, previously managed by the Commission, providing a more coherent and effective structure (Duke, 2013, p. 113; Keukeleire, 2014, pp. 81-82). The EEAS is headquartered in Brussels, assists the HRVP in their function, cooperates with diplomatic services of the EU member states, and comprises officials from relevant departments in the General Secretariat of the Council and of the Commission, as well as staff seconded from national diplomatic services (Keukeleire, 2014, pp. 81-82). A crucial component of the EEAS is the network of EU delegations, which represent the EU in third countries, multilateral organizations, or conferences, and act in close cooperation with member states' consular and diplomatic missions (Keukeleire, 2014, pp. 81-82). Their role in conducting public diplomacy is pivotal as they contribute to implementing EU programs, entertain relations with local media, organize events and cultural activities, share newsletters, and promote information campaigns (Duke, 2013, pp. 124-125). More generally, they aim to streamline external communication, and while it is not always true that the EU speaks with one voice, this does not preclude the possibility of conveying coherent common messages. (Keukeleire, 2014, pp. 81-82; Rasmussen, 2010, p. 269). Furthermore, they often collaborate with other EU PD actors on the ground, such as the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) and the EU Chambers of Commerce, focusing on cultural or economic

aspects, respectively, with mixed results depending on the receiving country (Fisher, 2013, pp. 137-138; Marchukov & Morari, 2024, p. 157).

Ultimately, despite increased coordination efforts, EU public diplomacy remains a complex creature even to this very day, mostly due to the differing priorities and understandings held by supranational institutions in contrast to member states. From the perspective of the latter, PD is often viewed as an integral part of national diplomacy, aimed at promoting the country abroad through different initiatives, while the former tend to adopt a more transversal approach, focusing on climate change, migration, or human rights (Duke, 2013, p. 117). This tension directly impacts the EU's value-driven public diplomacy, particularly its strategic communication of norms: this approach mirrors the one of the Holy See, which relies on global Catholic networks to shape discourse and promote moral debates, though not without internal tensions of its own.

Moving on to the specific PD strategies adopted by the EU, they can be grouped into three categories. The first one is the normative communication strategies, based on the aforementioned Normative Power Europe (NPE) theory, first developed by Ian Manners (2002). Using his theory as a starting point for their analysis of EU public diplomacy in China, Marchukov & Morari (2024, p. 159) explain how the Union uses public diplomacy to promote normative values, i.e., human rights, democracy, sustainability, etc. However, the two authors argue that the current system is far from flawless: not only is there usually a lack of personnel and financial resources, but the effectiveness of its programs is also mediocre (Kutyrev & Marchukov, 2024, p. 29; Marchukov & Morari, 2024, p. 159). Furthermore, the EU's value-driven strategy has been facing some challenges, specifically in China, mostly due to the administrative barriers from the Chinese government and the ambivalence of the Union's position towards the country (Marchukov & Morari, 2024, p. 159). This shows that public diplomacy is used in practice by the EU to export its value-driven identity abroad, but has some important limitations, especially in countries with a different sociopolitical and cultural system, much like what happens with the Holy See in some of its relations with authoritarian countries, as mentioned above.

The second category of EU public diplomacy strategies is based on engagement through storytelling, centered on the use of emotionally resonant narratives to gain credibility, as described by Hedling (2019). The author describes how, in recent years, this element has become pivotal in EEAS campaigns, especially with the "European Way" (i.e., the communication arm of the 2016 EUGS, aimed at translating the complex goals of the latter into resonant narratives for EU and external

audiences), to create affective legitimacy and emotional connection (Hedling, 2019, 143). Based on the pillars of engagement, legitimation through representation, and recognition, this new strategy of EU PD is the Union's response to the urgency to get the EU public more involved in foreign policy following Brexit, the current wave of Euroscepticism and disinformation (Hedling, 2019, 143). The inclusion of affect-based diplomacy, alongside traditional rational persuasion, demonstrates that the Union is constructing its external identity also on symbolism, similar to the aforementioned Holy See crafting of moral leadership, justice, and peace narratives.

The third group of strategies is regionally tailored tools. In fact, EU public diplomacy strategies vary to different extents according to the various regions of the world, with instruments being tailored to the specific local contexts, albeit with different impacts and success. For instance, in Latin America, the EU utilizes advocacy, cultural diplomacy, and academic exchanges to interact with the local community, which generally has a positive attitude toward the Union (Kutyrev & Marchukov 2024, p. 29). However, it is also facing important challenges, including a shortage of financial and human resources, and a lack of differentiation in media policy toward Latin American countries, reducing the efficacy of conducting its norm-based diplomacy (Kutyrev & Marchukov 2024, p. 29). The hurdles the EU is facing in China are even greater, mostly because of the limited contact and visibility with the local communities due to the government's censorship and constrained institutional access, as mentioned above (Marchukov & Morari, 2024, p. 159). In the Western Balkans and neighboring countries, the tactics adopted are also different: here, the Union relies on think-tank-led cultural diplomacy and elite engagement based on media literacy and counter-disinformation campaigns (Bajenova, 2023, p. 200). These three examples, representing just a small fraction of the territories where the EU operates, demonstrate the absence of a one-size-fits-all strategy by the Union when engaging on the international stage, reflecting the complexity of its identity and the adaptability of its PD instruments.

Despite innovation in storytelling and strategic communication as well as flexibility, EU public diplomacy is still struggling, mostly in terms of credibility and reach, due to a number of reasons. First of all, the system is riddled with internal fragmentation due to the existence of multiple institutions, with their roles sometimes overlapping and spreading conflicting narratives, and to the heterogeneity of member states' foreign policy (Hedling, 2019, pp. 143-144; Saliu, 2021, pp. 202-203). Furthermore, important perception gaps exist, causing a mismatch between how the EU promotes itself abroad, i.e., a transparent normative actor, and how it is perceived by external actors, i.e., endowed with self-interested and opaque behavior, thus leading to a lack of genuine dialogue as

is described by Chaban & Elgström (2020, p. 488) in the case of Ukraine. Lastly, the EU's major authoritarian competitors, namely China and Russia, often adopt a more centralized and efficient system of spreading ideas, intrinsic to their political system, which overshadows the Union's narrative, especially in certain areas like Latin America (Kutyrev & Marchukov, 2024, pp. 29-30). These weaknesses leave a potential wide normative and communicative space for non-state actors like the Holy See (via religious communities and associations) to fill with moral authority, narrative consistency, and global networks.

3.2 Interest Representation in the European Union

Having explored the dynamics of how the EU's external identity has been built and promoted through public diplomacy over recent decades, attention will now be turned inward, in particular, to how interests are represented within the context of the EU's institutional framework. While the former topic analyses how the Union has been projecting its image on the international stage, the latter examines how a wide array of stakeholders, including states, NGOs, corporations, and religious actors, have been seeking to shape EU policies from within. This section is of utmost importance as it will delve deeper into the process of interest representation, laying the foundations to understand the different ways through which a unique actor like the Holy See and Catholic associations in Brussels engage with and have their interest represented at the level of EU institutions, which will be the focus of subsequent chapters. This section thus aims to provide a theoretical framework for interest representation, discussing various theories. Firstly, the theory of access goods introduced by Bowen will be discussed, followed by the important contributions of Justin Greenwood on interest representation and lobbying, Majone on the theory of the EU as a regulatory state, and Keck and Sikkink on Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs), concluding with the work of De Bruycker and Beyers on Insider–Outside Strategy Model. These views will also provide key insights into potential interpretations of how the Catholic network fits into the picture.

3.2.1 Greenwood's Theory of Pluralist Interest Representation

A pivotal framework for understanding interest representation in the EU is provided by Greenwood (2011), who emphasizes the importance of organized interests for the correct and efficient functioning of the Union; they do not represent mere external pressure but have become an integral and structurally embedded feature (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 1-3). Furthermore, this model does not only draw attention to the business lobbies but supports a pluralist view: while acknowledging the importance of the former, it recognizes the existence of a wide variety of interests at the EU level, to

such an extent that even the most niche sectors, such as mustard seed producers or handwriting analysts have their interest organizations in Brussels (Greenwood, 2011, p. 11). In particular, the author places all of them under five macro-groups: business, labor, citizen, territorial, and civil society interest groups, delving into their specific features and relations with the EU institutions (Greenwood, 2011).

Specifically, Greenwood (2011, pp. 26-28) describes two main "routes of influence" through which interest groups can make their voice heard at the EU level: the national one, i.e., using national structures to engage with EU decision-making, and the Brussels one, namely by contacting the EU institutions directly either alone or collectively. While at first interest representation was mostly adopting the national route, over the recent decades this trend has been shifting, with the gradual extension of EU competencies tipping the scales in favor of better-organized, EU-oriented associations (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 26-28). In this regard, he highlights the growing professionalization of this sector, demonstrated among other things by the establishment of self-regulatory mechanisms like the EU Transparency Register, which, despite its flaws in accounting for all the actors, partially addresses the issues of transparency and democratic accountability (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 11-14, 55).

However, one important critical aspect of this theory should be emphasized: Greenwood's pluralistic view often downplays power asymmetries, namely unequal endowments, often leading to different lobbying strategies and unbalanced institutional access favoring the most affluent groups (Dür & Mateo, 2013, p. 660). Nevertheless, what makes Greenwood's theory particularly relevant to this thesis is the fact that the author adopts a pluralist view, considering a wide variety of EU stakeholders, not just the usual ones. In fact, he is one of the few authors who mentions non-traditional actors in his book, including religious organizations and churches. While not analyzing their interest representation in Brussels in great depth, they are not left out of the picture, as it often happens, because of their important role, especially under Article 17 of the TFEU, centered around the social and religious dialogue (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 13).

3.2.2 Pieter Bouwen's Theory of Access and Interest Groups

While Greenwood provides a broad categorization of actors and routes of influence, this second theory by Bouwen offers a more fine-grained analytical tool to understand how interest representation actually functions. In his 2002 seminal work on access goods, the author tries to make sense of how the wide variety of actors conduct interest politics at the EU level (Bouwen, 2002, p. 365). He argues

that interest representation can be best viewed through the lenses of "access goods", i.e., non-material goods harnessed by interest groups to gain access to the institutions of the EU (Bouwen, 2002, p. 370). In this context, the author identifies three types of access goods in the hands of the private sector: expert knowledge (EK), referring to the technical expertise and know-how relevant to specific policy areas; the information about the European Encompassing Interest (EEI), namely, concerning the broader priorities and needs at the EU level; and the information about the Domestic Encompassing Interest (DEI), i.e., the needs and interests of a sector in the domestic market (Bouwen, 2002, p. 369). While these categories were originally conceptualized for the private sector, the logic of access can be extended to non-business actors, including religious groups, organizations, and associations in Brussels, which possess valuable forms of knowledge and represent ethical, moral, and community-based interests, becoming increasingly relevant in EU policy debates, especially on human, socioeconomic, and environmental rights, as will be shown in the next chapters.

Furthermore, these access goods are weighed differently by the three major institutions: the European Commission prioritizes expert knowledge (EK) relying heavily on external sources to obtain the necessary expertise and EEI in its role as a "promotional broker in the EU legislative process" over DEI; the European Parliament needs a limited amount of EK since the Commission has already drafted the proposals and it thus favors EEI to decide and DEI, which is necessary for MEPs to gain information on their constituents and increase their chances of being re-elected; in the Council, national interests prevail and knowing about DEI is thus of utmost importance but collectivity also matters explaining why EEI is also needed (Bouwen, 2002, pp. 379-382). While originally applied to business lobbying, this framework may serve as a useful analytical tool to understand how and through which channels a wider array of actors, including religious interest groups and faith-based organizations, seek access and influence within the EU system. Not by chance, in a later article, Bouwen (2004, pp. 337, 360) systematizes the model explaining how business interests in the EU's multi-level system are represented ad hoc, following the logic of supply and demand, and explains that this can be a good starting point to analyze the behavior of non-business lobbying. This theory thus lays the foundation for the analysis of religious interest representation in Brussels, which will be conducted in the next chapter. However, it should be kept in mind that just like every other theory, Bouwen's has its critics. In particular, one key limitation is that the author's clear-cut perspective does not fully reflect the complexity of reality, where a wide range of diverse and sometimes conflicting sources offer differing accounts of how interest organizations in Brussels operate: these generalizations should thus be treated with caution (Berkhout & Lowery, 2008, p. 489).

3.2.3 Majone's Theory of the EU as a Regulatory State

The third theory to be analyzed in this section is the one proposed by Giandomenico Majone in his 1996 book, "Regulating Europe." The author argued back then that "economic and social regulation were becoming the new frontier of public policy and public administration in Europe, both at national and EU levels" (Majone, 1996, *Abstract*). In other words, the EU was becoming a regulatory polity, thanks to the growth of independent regulatory bodies, which were replacing not only state intervention but also the redistributive policies that characterized its previous model, namely the Keynesian welfare state (Majone, 1996, p. 55). According to Majone (1996, p. 66), the emergence of this new regulatory state within the EU was caused by several factors that are analyzed in depth in his book: the external American influence where a similar model had already emerged from the late 1800s, the crisis of the interventionist policies, namely the welfare state, the need for a regulatory framework following the privatization of sectors that had previously been in public hands, and, most importantly, the growing body of Community regulations. In this regulatory context, technical expertise and credibility have come to be held in high regard, with the Commission's and agencies' knowledge-driven functions becoming a pillar of this system (Majone, 1996, p. 79).

The reasoning behind this is to outsource regulation to independent actors at the EU level, such as the Commission and several agencies, to gain credibility: these non-majoritarian institutions, based on expertise and transparency, create long-term effective solutions as they are not driven by short-term incentives, contrary to politicians (Majone, 1996, pp. 1-5). Despite creating a democratic deficit, as they are elected by the people, these institutions are simply better suited for regulatory purposes according to the author (Majone, 1996, pp. 1-5). Furthermore, the author criticizes both positive theories of regulation, which see the regulatory process as the sole outcome of interest group pressure, and normative ones, for which it is justified because of public good; he supports instead the institutionalist view, arguing that institutions and their mechanisms matter, not just actors or norms (Majone, 1996, pp. 28-31).

While criticized by Dür & De Bièvre (2007b, p. 1) for presenting an overly technocratic vision of the EU regulations, as interest representation is also about power politics, this theory provides relevant insights for this thesis. Majone's model leaves conceptual room for understanding how non-traditional actors like the Holy See engage with EU institutions: not through economic power or electoral legitimacy, but by positioning themselves as credible sources of ethical expertise and normative authority. In this context, the Holy See input on topics such as bioethics, humanitarian crises, and human dignity can be interpreted as a form of soft regulatory input, aligning with Majone's

emphasis on the value of depoliticized, long-term, knowledge-based contributions to policymaking in Brussels.

3.2.4 Keck and Sikkink's TANs theory

The fourth theory to be discussed is quite distinct from the others, as it originates from the fields of international relations and sociology, particularly in the Latin American context, rather than EU studies per se. However, it is beneficial for this thesis as it provides the lenses to understand how normative non-state actors operate transnationally and make their voices heard through the so-called transnational advocacy networks (TANs), elsewhere as much as in Brussels. In their seminal work *Activists Beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink (1998) define advocacy networks as "forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange" whose aim is to "promote causes, principled ideas, and norms" (p. 6). According to them, these are mostly composed of NGOs, intergovernmental organizations, social movements, foundations, media, churches, trade unions, and consumer organizations (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 7). These groups act across state borders, but their way of interaction is akin to the one used by domestic groups: they share values and exchange information, as well as services, all categorized within common frames on which campaigns are based, and their strength lies in their speed of mobilization (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 7).

Furthermore, the two authors identify four tactics that these networks use to exert pressure: information politics (i.e. the strategic framing of issues by quickly spreading information), symbolic politics (namely the use of symbols and stories to convey a specific message to the broader audience), leverage politics (i.e., the instrumentalization of powerful actors to influence the more resistant ones) and accountability politics (i.e. holding powerful actors accountable to their stated course of action) (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 14). They also discuss the so-called boomerang effect, that is, when domestic groups are hindered from influencing their own government and thus seek help from their international allies, bypassing the national level (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 9).

However, it should not be forgotten that, in light of the growing professionalization of EU regulations, as described by Greenwood (2011), it is often more difficult for grassroots movements or normative networks to be effective in Brussels. Nevertheless, this study thus offers a useful model to understand how the Holy See and religious actors operate in Brussels without adopting conventional lobbying strategies and still make a difference. In particular, they are often part of value-based advocacy coalitions promoting values like human dignity, life, solidarity and religious freedom.

3.2.5 De Bruycker and Beyers' Theory on Inside and Outside EU Lobbying

The last theory of EU interest representation to be analyzed is the one proposed by De Bruycker and Beyers (2019) in their article on inside and outside lobbying in the EU. On the one hand, outside lobbying "comprises tactics that indirectly address policymakers through mobilizing and raising the awareness of a broader audience" (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019, p. 57). In practice, this often involves the use of public communication strategies, including media pressure, the creation of public campaigns, and the organization of protest demonstrations to raise public awareness about a specific issue. On the other hand, inside lobbying is based on direct contact between the interest group and the policymakers, through private communication either over the phone, via email, or face-to-face: unlike the former, this happens behind the scenes and out of public view most of the time (De Bruycker and Beyers, 2019, pp. 57-58).

In particular, the authors examine how interest groups in Brussels strategically adopt either one of the two strategies or a combination of the two to achieve their policy objective: this is particularly insightful as it is tested directly on the EU legislative context, consisting of an in-depth media analysis as well as more than 200 interviews of policymakers active on 78 dossiers (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019, p. 57). The authors show that neither of the two strategies is more successful than the other per se, but their success is dependent on the diversification of lobbying strategies, i.e., the adoption of multiple instruments at the same time, and the type of policy that is to be influenced (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019, p. 57). Specifically, the results demonstrate that outside lobbying is more successful when the cause receives widespread support in media debates and when a coalition with other like-minded organized interests is formed to engage with policymakers (De Bruycker & Beyers, 2019, p. 57).

However, it is important to remember that, like any theory, this one has limitations. Interest representation is not driven solely by tactical rationality but is also shaped by the availability of financial resources and institutional barriers, as highlighted in earlier work by Beyers and Kerremans (2007, p. 460). While this predates De Bruycker and Beyers' (2019) study and is therefore not an explicit critique of it, these insights remain highly relevant and serve as a useful complement when analyzing interest representation in the EU context. Therefore, while not fully accounting for value-driven motivations which form a key part for the interest representation of the Holy See in Brussels, the article is still useful to understand the polity's hybrid tactics towards the EU: as an insider

participating in religious dialogue as per art.17 of TFEU and expert inputs on issues like education and migration and as an outsider through symbolic framing and moral advocacy.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, while each section has focused on distinct yet interrelated elements, a comprehensive theoretical framework emerges, which will be used as a starting point for the analysis and discussion of the Holy See engagement with the EU. In particular, competing visions of the EU's international identity, namely CPE, NPE, and MPE, alongside theories of public diplomacy rooted in strategic communication, norm diffusion, and identity storytelling, provided a multi-dimensional framework of how the Union projects itself on the global stage. This image the EU has built will thus be used as the starting point to assess how the Holy See and its network of associations in Brussels frame and adjust the discussion around common issues like peace, education, human rights, climate change, and socioeconomic equality, not merely as passive moral authorities, but as an active and strategic participant in shaping discourse, and influencing values-based policymaking.

Regarding interest representation, the diverse set of theoretical lenses provided will help capture the multiple strategies and logics through which the Holy See and the network of Catholic actors engage with EU institutions: Greenwood's pluralist approach justifies the inclusion of non-traditional interest groups such as religious organizations in Brussels; Bouwen's access goods theory provides a framework to evaluate how religious actors can offer ethical, normative, and community-based forms of expertise that are valued differently across EU institutions; Majone's regulatory state model creates openings for religious NGOs or associations, based on the EU's preference for depoliticized, expertise-driven input; Keck and Sikkink's Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) framework helps situate the Holy See within broader global normative coalitions; finally, the insider–outsider lobbying model by De Bruycker and Beyers accounts for the hybrid strategies the Holy See adopts either through formal dialogue mechanisms under Article 17 TFEU or symbolic, value-laden advocacy. Together, the theories highlighted in this chapter provide a comprehensive lens through which to analyze the Holy See engagement with the European Union, as a non-state moral authority navigating and interacting with a norm-driven yet strategically complex global actor – an analysis to which attention now turns.

CHAPTER 4: THE HOLY SEE AND CATHOLIC ACTORS' VALUE-BASED ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES TOWARDS THE EU

This chapter will move from a structural and conceptual framework to a more operational analysis, examining the actions and strategies adopted by the Holy See and the network of Catholic associations and organizations in Brussels to make their voice heard in specific EU policy debates since the Maastricht Treaty, notably on migration, environmental sustainability, socio-economic rights, education, and external relations. The focus of this chapter will thus be placed on analyzing the initiatives of said Catholic actors, within the broader context of the Holy See strategy towards the EU. In fact, analyzing the engagement strategies of the Holy See and connected actors towards the EU is of pivotal relevance to understand how the religious polity adapts its tools, most notably based on soft power, to a complex and unique policy environment like the one of the EU.

The subsequent chapter is structured into five main sections. It begins with a conceptual preamble that situates the Holy See engagement within the broader role of religion in the European Union, highlighting the normative tensions between secular governance and religious values. The next section maps the Holy See diplomatic and symbolic presence in Brussels, focusing on the Apostolic Nunciature to the EU, papal discourse, and the thematic priorities driving its EU engagement. The following section analyzes how Catholic actors, including COMECE, JRS Europe, CIDSE, and Caritas Europa, translate doctrine into policy influence through advocacy, partnerships, and grassroots initiatives. The second-to-last section consolidates these elements into a cohesive framework, demonstrating how the Holy See soft power operates across multiple levels of EU policymaking, while the last one critically reflects on the institutional and strategic challenges that constrain this engagement.

The hypothesis to be tested in this and the following chapter thus reads as follows: *since 1992, the Holy See and Catholic actors have developed a structured and adaptive engagement strategy in Brussels, leveraging moral authority and value-based messaging to attempt to influence the EU policy discourse despite institutional and normative constraints*.

4.0 Religion in the EU: Christianity and Beyond

Any analysis of the Holy See engagement with the EU cannot but start from the deeper normative dimension, namely the place of religion, and Christianity in particular, within the Union's identity. From its origins, a key tension has existed between religious values and the EU's secular institutional framework. It is not by chance that Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, and Charles de Gaulle (known as the founding fathers of the EU), despite being of Catholic denomination and never advocating for a European Union contrary to Catholic values, took decisions on which ecclesiastical influence played a very limited role (Sutton, 2013, p. 45). Whatever their personal convictions were, their actions were not driven by the idea of restoring a Christian Europe (Sutton, 2013, p. 45). Instead, the dominant integration paradigm during the foundational period of the Community, namely functionalism, first articulated by David Mitrany (1943, pp. 19-25; 1965, pp. 144-145), emphasized that peace and depoliticization of international affairs could be attained thanks to cooperation in concrete and technical sectors. Neo-functionalists such as Ernst Haas (1958/2004, p. 283) later added that cooperation in one area could generate "spillover" into others and gradually shift loyalties toward supranational institutions. This path thus directed integration along economic and technical lines (such as coal, steel, nuclear energy, and the common market), leaving religion outside the institutional design of the EU, especially given the plurality of confessions in the six founding members and the broader modern dissociation between politics and religion (Mudrov, 2016, p. 7).

Furthermore, in line with the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* promulgated by Pope John Paul II, "the Church is not entitled to express preferences for this or that institutional or constitutional solution" and "consistently desires to respect the legitimate autonomy of the civil order" (John Paul II, 2003, para. 19). In other words, it has no power over the structural organization of EU governance. However, as a normative actor, the Holy See can shape the values of the EU policy-making environment, and in this sense, the aim of its engagement with the EU is two-fold: to ensure that the Union promotes a vision of global common good that coincides with the one endorsed by the religious polity, and to ensure that the Catholic Church remains relevant, both in the narratives and in practice, to the European identity (Turner, 2013, p. 79). In this sense, it should not be forgotten that Christianity has not only shaped modern Europe with its democratic and human rights ideals but it has also provided the continent with unity, enabling several people and cultures to integrate among themselves (John Paul II, 1991, para. 108).

Moreover, as shown by recent crises, religion (Catholicism as much as Islam) has re-emerged not only at the EU level but also in international politics in general, supported by the publication of

several academic works under the motto “religion is back” (Pavlovic, 2013, p. 106). In the case of European institutions, the predominant assumption is that of a secular perspective, and religion has thus often been treated as a transitory problem to be sorted out, despite its deep-seated and pervasive nature (Pavlovic, 2013, p. 106). This debate has further gained traction over the last few years due to the EU’s internal doubts about its identity, coinciding with the increased religious pluralism within its borders following migration and globalization, and will thus become even more important for the future of the EU.

One initial response of the EU to this issue was the establishment of a structured dialogue with churches, religious associations, and philosophical as well as non-confessional organizations, under Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU), introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 (Pollock, 2013, p. 123). For the first time, religious actors were thus granted an entry point to the “EU Bubble”, favoring their direct dialogue with EU institutions. However, according to Pollock (2013, pp. 130-131), the implementation of this principle caused an important issue: religious organizations, including Catholic ones, were given preferential access compared to non-religious ones, thus undermining in practice a whole set of principles of international law, on which the EU is based. In fact, the author explains how this mechanism is not only discriminatory but also grants these privileges to unelected actors (i.e., unrepresentative of their followers), whose values do not necessarily coincide with those of the Union, thus representing a cause of concern (Pollock, 2013, pp. 130-131).

Therefore, it is clear that the relationship between the EU and religion is far from straightforward: while the EU is secular in nature, religion has resurfaced several times over the decades in different shapes or forms, including Christianity. The role played by religious actors in Brussels, including the Holy See, will thus potentially be placed in the spotlight in the years to come, making the topic discussed here particularly relevant.

4.1 The Holy See Public Diplomacy Strategies in the EU

4.1.1 Institutional Presence in Brussels

This section will now turn the attention to how the Holy See and the Catholic network fit into the EU landscape, particularly the practices and tactics of their engagement in Brussels, which can be subsumed under four main categories. Firstly, the diplomacy of the Holy See is the face of this engagement, characterized by the presence of two apostolic nuncios, one to Belgium and one to the

EU, with the role of the latter being relatively circumscribed in character as, contrary to the Vatican Representative to the UN, he cannot intervene at the legislative level at any point (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, pp. 43-44; Turner, 2013, p. 77). Secondly, a pivotal role is played by COMECE (the Commission of Bishops' Conferences of the European Community). Its main tasks include providing pastoral leadership on issues such as fundamental rights, bioethics, and political or economic governance, as well as coordinating the Church's representation and dialogue with both ecumenical and interreligious partners in the EU (Turner, 2013, p. 77; Wijlens, 2001, p. 191). Then come religious-based order organizations, with the initiatives of Jesuits being particularly noteworthy. In fact, they have two institutions in Brussels covering EU political issues: the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and the Jesuit European Office (Turner, 2013, p. 78). The former deals with a variety of assistance services to refugees and asylum seekers all over the world, regardless of their religious affiliation, for instance by helping them reconnect with family in their home country, and their EU office, JRS Europe, specifically advocates for migrants' rights protections in EU legislation (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, p. 69; Turner, 2013, p. 78). The latter has instead three main functions: providing Christians in the EU institutions a forum to reflect on the connections between their faith and professional responsibilities; following EU issues that are very close to Christian values, namely the environment and climate change, poverty and social exclusion, among others; and striving to achieve social justice in various regions of the world that are affected by EU policies like Latin America (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, p. 69; Turner, 2013, pp. 78-79). Lastly, Catholic NGOs are also very active in Brussels, in various forms and covering a wide range of topics, from small, single-issue associations to international umbrella organizations, with dialogue structures of concentric circles (Turner, 2013, p. 78).

4.1.2 The Apostolic Nunciature to the EU

Within the framework of the Holy See public diplomacy in Brussels, a pivotal role is played by the Apostolic Nunciature to the European Union, which represents the most formal and institutionalized channel of diplomatic engagement between the two polities. While the thesis focuses on the period after the Maastricht Treaty, the evolution of the bilateral engagements from the beginning will be briefly described for better clarity and context.

Historically, the Holy See attempt to establish diplomatic relations with the European Economic Community began in 1963, led by Apostolic Nuncio Silvio Oddi in Brussels and, although it was welcomed by Commission figures such as Hallstein and Rey, it was initially unsuccessful because of the French opposition, most notably by De Gaulle, who argued that the religious polity had more of

a cultural and spiritual role in Europe than a political one (Leustean, 2014, pp. 99, 106). Nevertheless, the preceding years had been characterized by the emergence of a vibrant Catholic community in Europe's institutional capitals: informal and pastoral structures like the Catholic Secretariat for European Issues, the Foyer Catholique Européen, and especially OCIPE (Office Catholique d'Information sur les Problèmes Européens) had already been established by that time in Strasbourg and Brussels, laying the foundations for subsequent engagement with the EU (Leustean, 2014, pp. 92-98). In fact, these initiatives, often led by lay experts and clergymen rather than Vatican diplomats at the time, enabled the Holy See to open a channel of dialogue with EU policy-makers on socioeconomic issues, migration, education, and development that would later become pivotal to the discourse of the religious polity and its advocacy network in Brussels (Leustean, 2014, pp. 92-98).

In 1970 came the breakthrough when the then Apostolic Nuncio to Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Council of Europe, Igino Eugenio Cardinale, was formally accredited to the European Communities, becoming also the doyen of the diplomatic corps in Brussels, as customary, and marking the establishment of the Apostolic Nunciature to the EC, and later to the EU. This step was not accidental: the 1970s marked, in fact, the first attempts by the European Communities to establish a common foreign policy and diplomatic posture through the launch of the European Political Cooperation (Hill et al., 2023, p. 30; Nuttall, 1992, p. 30). In this context, the Apostolic nuncio was received on the same footing as ambassadors of third states, confirming that the Holy See was treated as a sovereign diplomatic counterpart within the supranational framework (Leustean, 2014, pp. 151-152). Since then, the Nunciature has served as the Holy See main diplomatic connection to EU institutions, operating alongside other Catholic actors like COMECE, ecumenical organizations, Catholic NGOs, etc., and contributing to shaping Brussels' evolving political-religious landscape following Delors' appeal for a "soul of Europe" in the 1990s, exemplified by the later institutionalization of churches-EU relations through Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty (Leustean, 2014, pp. 190-203). This progressive institutionalization contributed to the elevation of these two sui-generis international actors to a higher level of political recognition, as proven by the increased number of papal visits to the EU in subsequent years, a topic which will be discussed next (Leustean, 2014, pp. 190-203).

4.1.3 Papal visits and speeches: Framing a Normative Vision for Europe

Complementing the Nunciature's permanent diplomatic service, papal visits over the years have served as high-profile moments of symbolic engagement, shaping and steering the Holy See normative relationship with the European Union. This approach was, in fact, initiated by John Paul II, who laid its foundations by framing the European integration process as both a political and a

cultural one (DeBattista, 2025, p. 12). This was evident during his visit to the EEC headquarters in Brussels in 1985 and his 1988 address to the European Parliament in Strasbourg which marked the foundational moments in the Holy See public diplomacy towards the EU, as the Pontiff emphasized the importance of the peace, democracy, diversity, solidarity, and human dignity as the basis of a united Europe (John Paul II, 1988, pp. 2–3; Witkowska-Chrzczonowicz 2021, pp. 462–465). Indeed, he famously called for a "Europe that breathes with two lungs", i.e., East and West, anticipating the EU's eventual expansion and positioning the Catholic Church as a unifying moral voice (John Paul II, 1988, p. 2). As it was also noted at later stages, John Paul II did not enter into the technicalities of integration itself but perceived Europe as a "community of spirit", based on common values rather than economic interests (DeBattista, 2025, p. 12). These views helped frame the unique position of the Holy See as both a sovereign actor and a normative partner in the evolving identity of the EU.

Although he never visited the EU institutions, Pope Benedict XVI's engagement with the European Union was built on the legacy of John Paul II, placing even a stronger emphasis on what he deemed to be a cultural and spiritual crisis of the European project, marked by relativism brought to its extreme, the neglect of Europe's Christian roots, and the relegation of religion to the private sphere. This concern was reflected in a series of interventions made by the Pontiff, notably in his 2006 address to MEPs of the European People's Party, his 2007 speech celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, and his remarks to European Universities lecturers, where he argued that European integration could not succeed without recovering its Christian identity and moral foundations (Benedict XVI, 2006; 2007b; 2007c). The Pope strongly criticized the recent EU trend of relegation of religion to one's private sphere and declared that policies built on these premises would not only be inherently neglectful of Christianity's historical public role in the Europe, but they would also exclude dialogue with Europe's religious traditions, thus undermining the democratic values on which it is founded (Benedict XVI, 2006; 2007b). In particular, for Benedict XVI, European unity was rooted in a combination of faith and reason, safeguarded by the Catholic Church, whose role he deemed essential to a "new humanism" grounded in human dignity as well as the recognition of the divine (Benedict XVI, 2007c). In other words, as highlighted by DeBattista (2025, pp. 6-8), this Pontiff underscored the new role of the Catholic Church as a guardian of Europe's cultural memory, without which the EU risked becoming a technocratic and value-neutral system. Through these high-level speeches, Benedict XVI contributed to shaping the Holy See public diplomacy strategy towards the EU as one centered not only on ethics and subsidiarity but also on countering the Union's spiritual and cultural forgetfulness with a robust Catholic memory.

Pope Francis has subsequently taken the stance of both a critical friend and a pastoral advocate of the European Union, providing a moral and humanistic vision for its renewal. In his three major speeches centered on the EU, namely his 2014 address to the European Parliament (the first one since John Paul II's almost forty years earlier), the 2016 Charlemagne Prize acceptance speech, and his 2017 remarks for the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, Francis insisted on the importance of solidarity, human dignity and peace as the founding values of the Union (Francis 2014; 2016; 2017). As highlighted by Daly (2017, pp. 288-289), although the Pontiff spoke about the EU "with the ardor of a neophyte", his interventions were marked by a deep understanding of the high stakes and future implications of the European project for the majority of EU citizens.

In particular, the focal point of his appeal is the recovery of a "new humanism", based on the capacities of inclusion, dialogue, and generativity (Francis, 2016, pp. 2-3). While the foundations recall those of his predecessor, Benedict XVI, the tone and emphasis are clearly different. In this spirit, he challenged the EU not to become an elderly and haggard continent, as it was giving the impression of, but encouraged the polity to unite by investing together in young people, the reinvigoration of its democratic foundations, and the value of human life in its entirety (Francis, 2014, pp. 1-5). Interestingly, the Pontiff also strongly defended the supranational nature of the EU, warning against the forgotten consequences of nationalist isolation that the founding fathers so strenuously strived to avoid, calling for unity and solidarity among member states, especially in times of acute crises (Francis, 2017, pp. 1-3). While not opting for an institutional language, Pope Francis' speeches have provided an important input for the Holy See public diplomacy posture as well as Catholic actors' advocacy in Brussels, positioning them as moral interlocutors and guides, thus reinforcing the importance of the dialogue based on Article 17 of the TFEU. While Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI emphasized Europe's spiritual memory and cultural foundations, Pope Francis reinterpreted this legacy through a pastoral lens, thus calling the European Union not only to remember its soul but to renew it through inclusion, solidarity, and care. With the election of Pope Leo XIV in May 2025, a new chapter in the Holy See engagement with the EU begins, although the approach of the new Pontiff has not yet been articulated.

4.1.4 Thematic Priorities in EU Engagement

The Holy See engagement with the European Union over the past three decades has centered on a range of key themes rooted in the religious polity's doctrinal priorities and strategic considerations. Five focus areas emerge as particularly relevant to the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels: migration, environmental sustainability, socio-economic rights, education, and external relations.

These themes are not arbitrarily selected, but rather grounded in a long-standing tradition of Catholic values, as articulated in the papal encyclicals and speeches, among other sources, which have served as guiding documents in these fields.

Migration is undoubtedly the most recurrent theme of the Holy See engagement with the European Union over the past three decades, rooted in the principles of human dignity and solidarity. Not by chance, in his speech to the European Parliament in 2014, Pope Francis (2014, p. 7) condemned the tendency of EU member states to treat migrants as numbers rather than people, which had led to the Mediterranean becoming a cemetery, and thus called on respective governments for a united human- and solidarity-based approach. This vision was also echoed in his 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*, reaffirming the pivotal value of universal fraternity (Francis, 2020, pp. 1-3). Therefore, migration is not seen by the Holy See as a mere policy issue, but its handling continues to test the EU's commitment to its founding values, hence the insistence on the issue.

Furthermore, environmental sustainability has gained particular traction in the last few years, especially since the publication of the encyclical *Laudato Si',* where Pope Francis linked ecological degradation to systemic social exclusion (Francis, 2015, pp. 1-6). He has also repeatedly urged the Union to act as a leader in the ecological transition, not just through new technologies but also through a renewed ethics of social responsibility (Francis, 2016, p. 4). This framing has thus shaped the latest Catholic engagement with the European Union on issues such as climate justice, corporate accountability, and the promotion of integral ecology

Moreover, socioeconomic justice has been another cornerstone of Catholic engagement worldwide, and Brussels is no exception: Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* laid the foundations once again, by advocating for an economy based on the greater good (Francis, 2015, pp. 1-6). In his remarks marking the 60th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome, the Pontiff also insisted that human dignity cannot be sustained by the market logic alone, on which the EU is often based, but a human dimension is also required (Francis, 2017, pp. 1-3). This concern has consistently guided Catholic advocacy in Brussels around fair wages, access to housing, just working conditions, and inclusive social protection frameworks, as it will be explored in greater depth in the subsequent sections.

Additionally, education has also been an important topic of Catholic engagement in Brussels, framed as essential to the formation of conscience, civic engagement, and cultural renewal, notably by Benedict XVI and Francis. The former emphasized the impact of educators in bringing back the

intellectual roots of Europe, and, by recalling the words of Pope Paul VI, further stressed the role of the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council in fostering human development through education in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Benedict XVI, 2009, p. 6). His successor additionally linked it to the recovery of a "new humanism" in Europe based on inclusion and civic responsibility (Francis, 2016, p. 3). These words signal the Pontiffs' belief in the transformative power of education, thus making it a key topic for Catholic engagement.

Lastly, in the area of external relations, the Holy See has consistently portrayed the EU as more than a political or economic bloc, often emphasizing its potential to foster peace and dialogue. In this context, John Paul II (1988, p. 2) famously spoke of a Europe breathing with "two lungs", urging the Union to bridge the gap between the East and the West, reconciling the two blocs. Benedict XVI (2007a, p. 4; 2010, p. 1) later echoed this vision by stressing the Union to promote international development and protect human rights abroad, emphasizing the principles of solidarity and human dignity. Pope Francis (2016, p. 4) has gone one step further by calling on the EU to act as a "builder of bridges" in a divided world, by enhancing intercultural and interreligious dialogue and contributing to conflict prevention. This broader vision is also reflected in the values promoted by the Holy See Apostolic Nunciature to the EU, which has always prioritized peace, freedom, and human rights as its core foreign policy goals, engaging other issues only through the lenses of this triad (Kratochvíl and Doležal, 2015, pp. 45–47). Therefore, papal diplomacy has traditionally framed the EU's foreign policy and external relations with a narrative linking the EU's legitimacy to its ability to embody normative power on the world stage.

Taken together, these five themes form the main foundation of the Holy See engagements in Brussels. However, they are not promoted by the religious polity on its own: a constellation of Catholic actors, such as COMECE, JRS Europe, CIDSE, Caritas Europa, and many others, have translated this thematic agenda into sustained advocacy with the EU institutions at different levels and through a wide array of tools (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, pp. 67-71). While remaining institutionally independent from the Holy See, they are aligned with its broader moral vision and doctrinal teachings (Turner, 2013, pp. 77-78). The next section will thus explore in greater detail how these actors behave within this framework in Brussels, contributing to enriching the Holy See engagement at the EU level.

4.2 Catholic Advocacy in Brussels: Translating Doctrine into Policy Influence

4.2.1 COMECE: Institutional Advocacy and Norm Translation within the EU

The Commission of Bishops' Conference in the European Union (COMECE) serves as a prominent vehicle of institutional communication between the Holy See, as well as the Catholic Church more generally, and the EU policy-making environment. First of all, its strategic and adaptive approach to the Holy See engagement in Brussels should be highlighted: acting at a crossroads between representation and policy action, COMECE translates Roman Catholic values into EU-compatible actionable frameworks, mediating between the doctrinal teachings of the former and the secular governance of the latter (Wijlens, 2001, pp. 203-204). Established in 1980, the body has been fulfilling several pivotal practical functions in this regard: using the status working groups on certain themes to attract important EU senior figures to its events and seminars; publishing booklets, either as official positions adopted by the COMECE bishops or as reports of the working groups addressed to those bishops, as well as a monthly journal named Europe Infos, in conjunction with the Jesuit European Office, to comment on current EU affairs; and coordinating, whenever possible, with equivalent bodies of other Christian churches, especially the Conference of European Churches (CEC) (Turner, 2013, p. 82; Wijlens, 2001, pp. 205-211). Therefore, the influence of COMECE in the EU policy-making arena stems from its network-building capabilities: through several collaborations with other associations as well as NGOs, it has managed to orchestrate a multi-level engagement strategy amplifying the Catholic Church's voice in both formal and informal arenas (Wijlens, 2001, pp. 205-211). In this sense, COMECE's credibility and coordination capacities have made the Catholic Church very visible in Brussels, compared to other more fragmented and under-resourced religious representations, particularly those of Islamic groups whose access to the EU institutions has remained largely symbolic or inconsistent (Massignon, 2007, pp. 136-137).

Furthermore, COMECE has been engaging EU institutions across multiple levels, either through the aforementioned working groups or the photo opportunities between the highest level of political and religious leadership in Europe (Mudrov, 2017, p. 68). However, the results have been mixed: while the former are more substantial in nature and enable greater influence, especially if the Church experts are good professionals in their fields, the latter are more ceremonial events with little opportunity for substantial intervention or discussions (Mudrov, 2017, p. 68). Yet, this should not obscure COMECE's significance: it remains one of the most well-organized and active religious actors in Brussels, which has distinguished itself through thematic expertise and continued engagement over the recent decades (Massignon, 2007, p. 132). As a matter of fact, its constrained influence is less the

outcome of its own internal capacities than the EU's institutional design, which has limited religious engagement even if formally recognized (Mudrov, 2017, p. 70).

Moreover, unlike traditional interest groups or diplomatic missions, COMECE does not wield political or economic leverage but draws on the normative legitimacy of the Catholic Church's moral teachings. Within the framework established by Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), religious organizations such as COMECE are indeed formally recognized as "interest partners" rather than lobbyists, reflecting their distinctive status in the EU's pluralistic dialogue system (Turner, 2013, p. 82). In this regard, since its inception, COMECE has contributed to EU policymaking primarily by engaging in ethical debates and issuing position papers and public statements on the five priority areas and other more specific ones, such as synthetic biology (Heavey, 2017, p. 257).

Firstly, migration has always remained at the core of COMECE's moral advocacy agenda. For instance, in reaction to the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the organization expressed concerns over the potential increase of human suffering and mass detentions as well as the undermining of the right to asylum (COMECE, 2023, pp. 1-2). COMECE thus referred to both EU values and the biblical imperative of welcoming the stranger, urging policymakers to ensure that migration policy is not solely driven by electoral pressures (COMECE, 2023, pp. 1-2). This message was also echoed by Cardinal Hollerich (2022, pp. 1-2), then president of COMECE, in his speech reminding EU legislators that while they have the duty to protect public order and security, they also bear the moral responsibility to protect all human beings, especially those in precarious conditions. This value-based approach is not new, as already in 1999, COMECE emphasized the need to see migration as a structural feature of society, calling for comprehensive policies in the field, and again during the 2015 EU migration crisis, the body called for solidarity and burden-sharing among member states (COMECE, 1999, pp. 1–2; 2015, pp. 1-4). Therefore, from these documents, it becomes clear that COMECE has been advocating for a solution to the migration issue at the EU level, based on justice and compassion, rather than securitization. These principles may appear less operational compared to the technical language of EU governance, especially in the field of migration, but they reflect COMECE's function as a moral voice in the European policy debates, whose implications will be examined in Chapter 5.

Furthermore, on sustainability, COMECE has been supporting a culture of care that prioritizes the dignity of workers as well as ecological responsibility. Not by chance did it welcome the European

Parliament's adoption of the corporate sustainability due diligence directive, praising its inclusion of human rights and environmental accountability in corporate governance through a joint statement with the other members of the European Laudato Si' Alliance and Pax Christi International (2023, p. 1). In this regard, they also stressed the importance of fostering economic development while protecting vulnerable populations and respecting planetary boundaries (European Laudato Si' Alliance et al., 2023, p. 1). Furthermore, this religious body also took a strong position in response to the recent farmers' protest, acknowledging the tensions between the green transition goals and rural livelihoods, and thus calling for balanced human-based solutions centered around greater transparency, impact assessment, and stakeholder involvement (COMECE, 2024a, pp. 1-2). These positions are built on long-standing ecological concerns: in 2008 COMECE called for an "ethics of responsibility" in the EU climate policy aimed at intergenerational justice and universal destination of goods, while in 2018 the body called for a 2030 EU Climate Strategy that would foster an ambitious transition without sacrificing social cohesion (COMECE, 2008, pp. 1-2; 2018a, pp. 1-2). Therefore, while supporting the EU initiatives aimed at facilitating the green transition, COMECE has been advocating for policies that also take into account the economic sustainability of the process, especially for SMEs.

Moreover, on socioeconomic rights, the body has always believed in a just economic order grounded in the dignity of work and solidarity with the poor. In fact, it has been advocating for the EU and member states to: provide immediate assistance to vulnerable people, support businesses in need, facilitate access to affordable housing, encourage a dignified life through gender-equal work, and boost intergenerational solidarity, among other things (COMECE, 2021, pp. 9-11). These priorities reflect the positions expressed at earlier stages, namely in 2001 when COMECE called for EU monetary policies to promote quality employment and social protection, and in 2018 when the body contributed to the European Pillar of Social Rights debate by emphasizing the need for inclusive growth and solidarity-based prosperity in the context of the digital and ecological transformation of the EU economy (COMECE, 2001, pp. 9-14; 2018b, pp. 3-5). In other words, the Commission of Bishops has been advocating for EU prioritization of economically resilient, ethically responsible, and socially just policies, avoiding models neglectful of human and ecological well-being.

Additionally, in the field of education, COMECE's approach reflects the values of Christian hope and human development. In this regard, in his recent speech, the current COMECE President, Mgr. Mariano Crociata (2024b, pp. 1-3) highlighted the importance of education in fostering foundational values of the European Project, namely peace, confidence in the future, and social unity. Attention

was also drawn to the recent demographic decline, disillusionment among the youth, and the need for a renewed sense of Europe (Crociata, 2024b, pp. 1-3). COMECE also emphasized the unique role of universities, including Catholic ones, in offering interdisciplinary and dialogue-based responses to modern challenges (COMECE, 2022, p. 13). Therefore, the exclusive recent nature of these contributions, unlike in other fields, highlights the growing engagement of COMECE in this domain in the last decade, seeking to promote an idea of EU education pursued not only through academic excellence but most importantly through resilience, social cohesion, and spiritual renewal.

Lastly, in the sphere of EU external affairs, COMECE has often combined a geopolitical and moral outlook. For instance, it recently declared in a statement that while it praised the EU enlargement as a project rooted in Christian values, it also warned that cultural integration and shared responsibility beyond institutional growth were needed to achieve true unity, even more so if new members were to join soon (COMECE, 2024b, pp. 1-2). On top of this, COMECE has been consistently calling for the EU to foster peace and dialogue in areas of war, including the Holy Land and the Middle East, where it demanded adherence to humanitarian law, renewed efforts towards the two-state solution, and an internationally guaranteed special status for the City of Jerusalem (Crociata, 2024a, pp. 1-2). These messages echo earlier positions, including a 1997 statement on the importance of an enlargement based on institutional solidarity and respect of national identity, and a 2010 briefing paper on the necessity for the EU to uphold human rights, religious freedom and personal integrity in all its foreign policy initiatives (COMECE, 1997, pp. 1-2; 2010, pp. 2-3). It also commented on the EU defense cooperation, specifically on the EU Global Strategy by emphasizing the need for the Union to remain a relevant actor without overmilitarizing its security and by investing more in human development, diplomacy, and political economy of peace (COMECE, 2017, pp. 4-6). This shows that through these interventions, COMECE positions itself as a moral voice in EU foreign policy, advocating for a values-based approach to peace, human rights, and international responsibility.

Ultimately, this thematic overview showed how COMECE has been active in translating general Catholic moral principles, as highlighted in papal discourses, into actionable suggestions and recommendations for EU policies, reinforcing the Holy See engagement in Brussels.

4.2.2 JRS Europe: Bridging Values and Evidence in EU Migration Policy

Among the Catholic actors complementing the Holy See presence in Brussels, a crucial role in advocating for migrant rights and human dignity in the EU has been played by the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Europe, which adopts peculiar tools to make its voice heard in the policy-making arena.

In particular, while COMECE operates primarily through institutional dialogue, JRS, as a religious order-based international organization, distinguishes itself for its threefold action based on accompaniment, service, and advocacy for refugees all over the world (Cosacchi, 2019, p. 664). Its branch in the EU deals with the same issues, and its recent work has thus been particularly shaped by the EU 2024 Pact on Migration and Asylum.

In particular, in its 2024 position paper on *Hospitality-Driven Reception*, JRS Europe expressed its opposition to central elements of the Pact, specifically the use of mandatory border procedures and detention compounds as default features of processing asylum seekers (Jesuit Refugee Service Europe, 2024b, pp. 2-4). What the organization advocates for instead is a decentralized, community-based reception model reflecting Catholic values of solidarity and hospitality in an attempt to humanize migrants rather than objectifying them as administrative problems (JRS Europe, 2024b, pp. 2-4). This stance is the continuation of a similar line of advocacy adopted earlier on. In fact, already in 2010, the body criticized the EU for prioritizing deterrence over protection, urging policy-makers to treat asylum as a fundamental right and not an arbitrary policy (JRS Europe, 2010, p. 5). Similarly, JRS Europe warned in 2016 that the EU-Turkey deal not only risked failing the protection needed by forcibly displaced people but also raised important questions about the rule of law and democratic accountability within the EU (JRS Europe, 2016, p. 2). This critique of migrants' conditions and right to asylum aligns closely with the position taken by COMECE on the topic, but is strategically complemented by JRS Europe's human-centered approach, which strengthens the Holy See engagement in Brussels by connecting moral advocacy to decades-long practical experience on the ground and long-standing services to migrants.

Furthermore, the role of JRS Europe as an EU policy actor is further demonstrated by its involvement in EU-level consultations, including continued engagement within the Frontex Consultative Forum on Fundamental Rights, as well as high-level policy-makers, namely MEPs and Officials of the European Commission, to discuss the issue, as mentioned in the 2023 Annual Report (JRS Europe, 2024a, pp. 24-25). The document also highlights the importance of advocacy campaigns conducted by JRS Europe, such as the "Detention under the Spotlight" project, which sheds light on the systematic rights violations in asylum detention facilities across Europe (JRS Europe, 2024a, p. 16). JRS Europe has always been particularly vocal about this topic, even during the COVID-19 pandemic when it published a report denouncing the illegal detention of migrants by many EU countries, regardless of the impossibility for these people to return to their home country: the organization thus

called for legal alternatives and regularizations of temporary status (JRS Europe, 2021, pp. 2-3, 9-10).

Therefore, thanks to its work, JRS Europe is not only an advocate of migrants' rights at the EU level but also contributes to the discussions by providing concrete data and human testimonies, bridging the gap between values and evidence. Through this sustained engagement, JRS Europe not only advocates for migrants' rights but also reinforces the Holy See value-based engagement in Brussels by translating Catholic values into credible, evidence-driven contributions to EU policymaking.

Beyond policy papers, JRS Europe also approaches advocacy through direct testimony and storytelling. For instance, in its 2024 contribution "10 stories of home away from home", the organization amplified the voices of Ukrainian refugees in neighboring countries, namely Romania, Slovakia, and Poland, by providing an account of JRS Europe's contributions which helped these people overcome forced displacement through positive integration and resilience (JRS Europe, 2024c, pp. 3-6). Once again, this narrative exemplifies how JRS Europe follows the lines of the Holy See engagement in Brussels by using core Catholic values and principles as the basis of its resonant communication with the EU policy-makers, thus shaping the discourse not only through institutional engagement (used much less than COMECE) but through storytelling grounded in real-life experiences.

Together, these materials highlighted that JRS Europe has not only been an important support provider to migrants in the EU but also an integral and essential part of the Holy See multi-level diplomacy in Brussels: its ability to combine moral authority, technical expertise, and personal testimony have progressively placed it in a good intermediary position between the Catholic Church moral vision and the EU policy-making system. Ultimately, this body inserts itself into the Holy See engagement framework in the EU by translating normative messages into politically relevant items, reinforcing soft power from the ground up.

4.2.3 Catholic NGOs Advocacy in EU Policymaking: CIDSE and Caritas Europa

Lastly, the role of Catholic NGOs contributing to the Holy See broader value-based engagement with the EU will be explored because of their relevance in operationalizing the religious polity's value-based diplomacy through independent yet theologically aligned advocacy, extending its moral influence on policy-making in Brussels via civil society channels. Among them, two are of particular importance: CIDSE (Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité) and Caritas

Europa. Both are institutionally independent of the Holy See and align their advocacy at the EU level with Catholic values of human dignity and social justice, but while the advocacy strategies of the former concern more high-level policy, those of the latter are more centered around grassroots service (Caritas Europa, 2025a, p. II; Turner, 2013, p.78). In this sense, Caritas Europa is more similar to JRS Europe, although not under the direction of a religious order.

On migration, Caritas Europa has always been particularly engaged, specifically in promoting EU migration policies which respect international humanitarian law: as early as 2008, it denounced overemphasis on security and control of asylum procedures, underscoring the importance of respecting every person's dignity in line with the principles of the Geneva Convention (Caritas Europa, 2008, pp. 23-25). This commitment has remained central to its advocacy, as shown in a recent report recommending a reception model based on limitation of detentions, prioritization of voluntary returns over forced removals, enhancement of safeguards for minors, and ensured access to legal remedies and reintegration support (Caritas Europa, 2025a, p. III).

CIDSE has instead been more vocal on climate and sustainability. In fact, in its recent position paper, the organization advocated for climate finance mechanisms such as debt relief and a loss-and-damage fund as part of the Catholic Church's call for integral ecology (CIDSE, 2025, pp. 1-3). Furthermore, CIDSE strongly supported the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive and defended the rights of smallholder farmers to ensure sustainable food systems and environmental stewardship (African Law Foundation et al., 2025, pp. 2–3). These interventions reflect the impact of Laudato Si' on the stance of the Catholic Church on the green transition and highlight CIDSE's technical ability to engage EU institutions in constructive, rights-based environmental dialogue.

Furthermore, a field in which both organizations are very active is socio-economic rights. CIDSE has long been critical of global inequalities, advocating ever since 2009 for fair taxation, fiscal justice, and redistribution of wealth in the EU in favor of basic services and public goods (CIDSE, 2009, pp. 2-7). It has operationalized these principles through sustained campaigning around the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, emphasizing its importance for ensuring accountability in corporate finance (CIDSE, 2022). Likewise, Caritas Europa has been very vocal about growing poverty and social exclusion in the Union, urging in a recent report the inclusion in the next EU budget of the following elements: increased funding to the European Social Fund, earmarked funding for training and jobs, social inclusion measures, and fighting child poverty, and measures that drive quality employment and social reforms (Caritas Europa, 2025b, pp. 1-2). This

organization also substantiates its position concretely: for instance, on 5 December 2023, Caritas Europa presented its report "Unfulfilled Promises" (which used a new localization index to expose gaps in donor support for locally led humanitarian action) in the European Parliament, an event attended by senior EU and national officials (Centre for Humanitarian Action, 2023). Therefore, the approach of both NGOs is based on the Catholic values of solidarity and inclusion, on which they aim to draw the focus of EU policy-makers.

In the domains of education and external relations of the EU per se, both organizations are less vocal, especially when compared to COMECE, as they contribute to these topics only sporadically and often through the socioeconomic lens of development and global justice, e.g., Caritas Europa's call for an equitable enlargement process in 2004 (Caritas Europa, 2004, pp. 11-17). Nevertheless, these two organizations remain pivotal for the Holy See engagement in Brussels because of their ability to expand the Catholic Chruch narrative in civil society spaces, using expertise, advocacy, and specialization to shape EU policy-making, as shown clearly in this section. It thus emerged that, as independent yet value-aligned actors, CIDSE and Caritas Europa complement the work of other existing channels in translating Catholic values into concrete policy proposals, with a specific grassroots and bottom-up approach.

4.3 Bringing together Vatican Soft Power Strategies in EU Policymaking

Having examined the institutional and symbolic presence of the Holy See within the EU framework and the policy advocacy of the Catholic actors in Brussels, this section will turn its attention to how these various efforts have formed a coherent strategy. It was already widely demonstrated that the Holy See exerts power not through coercion or material leverage but through soft power, which translates into the use of moral authority, historical symbolism, and normative discourse to influence policy-makers, rather than traditional lobbying capital (Byrnes, 2017, pp. 16-19). The goal of this section is thus to provide an understanding of how the Holy See and its affiliated actors in Brussels utilize soft power to influence EU policymaking in a united and cohesive manner. By focusing on the combination of symbolic framing, norm translation, and actor coordination, this section will show that it is not a diffuse or accidental engagement but is based on a strategically structured model of value-based diplomacy.

The first central pillar of the Holy See soft power strategy in Brussels lies in its ability to shape the political discourse through symbolic and moral authority. Since the late 1980s, this has become

evident in the public interventions of the three popes, i.e., John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis, who framed the EU integration not as a mere political or economic project but most importantly as a cultural and spiritual endeavor (DeBattista, 2025, pp. 5–8). From John Paul II's call for a Europe "that breathes with two lungs", to Benedict XVI's critiques of secularism and relativism, and to Pope Francis' appeal for a "new humanism" centered around solidarity and inclusion, papal speeches have provided a normative vision aimed at influencing the EU self-understanding (Benedict XVI, 2007b; Francis, 2016; John Paul II, 1988). These high-level interventions have been contributing to a dual objective: the establishment of a moral framework for pressing political challenges, including migration, poverty, climate change, etc., and the reinforcement of the Holy See legitimacy as an interlocutor for the EU (Arceneaux, 2023, pp. 3530-3531; Deiana et al., 2023, pp. 75-78). Although not policy-specific, these are strong soft-power instruments that shape the moral vocabulary of the EU discourse and pave the way for subsequent Catholic engagement in Brussels (Crespo & Gregory, 2019, pp. 115-117; Golan et al., 2018, pp. 95-98).

While papal discourses provide the overarching moral guidelines, Catholic actors in Brussels (i.e., COMECE, JRS Europe, CIDSE, Caritas Europa, etc.) translate these broader messages into specific policy-compatible instruments, thus tailoring their impact to specific policy areas. This process of norm translation, converting theological principles into right-based, legal, or technocratic frameworks, has become pivotal in the Holy See soft power strategy of engagement with the European Union over the last decades (Chilkina & Dorodonova, 2022, pp. 439-441). Not by chance, the expertise of the members of these organizations, adapting guiding Catholic principles, has been increasingly taken into consideration in lawmaking activities in the EU in specific policies like the promotion of public welfare, the dignity of the human person, participation, subsidiarity, and solidarity (Chilkina & Dorodonova, 2022, p. 441). Another field in which the Catholic Church network has been acting as a pioneering norm entrepreneur in the EU as much as worldwide, as demonstrated, is climate policy, where the general principles present in *Laudato Si'* were reframed as ethical imperatives for sustainable development, integral ecology, and intergenerational justice (Chu, 2022, p. 742). As demonstrated by the analysis above, the major instruments through which these organizations act as norm translators are policy consultations, position papers, and expert submissions. Therefore, thanks to the combination of moral authority and policy acumen, this network of organizations and associations strategically complements the Holy See soft power strategy in Brussels by coherently making Catholic messages fit into the EU narrative.

Consequently, the third major aspect that characterizes the Holy See engagement towards the Union is the presence of a multi-level ecosystem rather than a single channel in which different actors have been playing complementary roles depending on the audiences and institutional settings. To briefly reiterate, while the Apostolic Nunciature to the EU has provided a formal diplomatic link to EU officials based on the polity's sovereign status, COMECE has served as an intermediary between the ecclesial doctrine and EU policy-making, thanks to Article 17 of the TFEU and technical contributions based on Catholic values; meanwhile, associations and organizations like JRS Europe, Caritas Europa, and CIDSE, though slightly different in nature and scope, have provided legitimacy through grassroots and people-based advocacy campaigns (Turner, 2013, pp. 77-79). Several scholars have discussed how this approach makes the Holy See a unique actor whose influence on decision-making mechanisms, including those of the EU, should not be underestimated: Barbato (2013, pp. 27, 42-43) underscores how the multi-level actorness has been crucial for the religious polity, explaining how it has managed to harness the combination of diplomatic, transnational and grassroots spheres to make its voice heard, despite little attention from IR scholars. Byrnes (2017, pp. 17-19) similarly discusses how the Holy See soft power strategy has not only stood at the crossroads of religion and politics but also synchronized diplomatic presence with ecclesial dialogue and civil society engagement, which is true for the EU as much as in the rest of the world. Finally, Löffler (2021, pp. 1-3) highlights how symbolic papal authority and soft power have become politically meaningful only when embedded in activities that engage the wider population too, such as with the recent revolution of social media, which the Holy See still needs to utilize to its full potential. Therefore, through this architecture, the Holy See sustains a soft power strategy that is both flexible and coherent, enabling it to speak credibly across multiple levels of the EU governance system.

4.4 Tensions and Limitations in the Holy See-EU Engagement

However, the Holy See and Catholic actors' soft power strategy in Brussels is not without its contradictions, somewhat limiting the effectiveness of their engagement with the EU institutions. One significant challenge lies in the lack of strategic cohesion among the diverse Catholic network involved in EU advocacy, stemming from both the institutional independence and the broader structural complexity of the Catholic Church as a global diplomatic and spiritual entity (Byrnes, 2017, p. 18). While these dimensions are analytically distinct, they build upon one another, together complicating the coherence and unity of the Vatican's presence in EU policymaking.

To begin with, it should be kept in mind that all the aforementioned Catholic actors operating in the EU are structurally independent from one another, both in governance and strategy: while there is convergence on values, they are all based on their own institutional mandate and resources, rather than under a unified ecclesial authority (Turner, 2013, pp. 77-79). What can be derived from this is that, despite enabling a flexible and multifaceted approach to the EU institutions, it also makes it inherently difficult to speak with a single voice, especially when discussing politically sensitive and fast-moving policy issues.

This fragmentation is further complicated by what Byrnes describes as the "complex identity and […] interconnections that define the modern Catholic hierarchy (2017, p. 18). In other words, the Church's dual nature in international relations as both a spiritual and sovereign actor, discussed at length by Troy (2018, p. 521), is once again the source of its problems, often involving different layers of representation, which co-exist but are not always aligned. While allowing it to engage diverse audiences across diplomatic, political, religious, and humanitarian fields, it hugely complicates its internal coordination and consistency, including in the EU policy arena.

However, the greatest structural limitation of the Holy See soft-power-based engagement with the European Union since the Maastricht Treaty has remained the Union's secular institutional framework. As also discussed in the preamble of this chapter, and by many authors in the literature, this interaction is a complex one: the references to the EU's Christian heritage are often debated, and while there are currently some measures in place to enable dialogue with the religious community in the EU, notably article 17 of the TFEU, the broader logic of the integration process has been grounded in secular liberal principles, leading to the treatment of religion in policy domains with suspicion (Casanova, 2006, pp. 65-67; Foret, 2015, pp. 158-159; Pollock, 2013, p. 123). Consequently, the role and visibility of religious actors like the Holy See and the Catholic network in Brussels have historically been constrained by the EU institutions.

Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that religious affiliations and rates of religiosity vary widely across Europe, with traditionally catholic countries like Cyprus, Romania, and Greece attributing great importance to religion, in contrast to Sweden, Denmark, and Luxembourg (European Commission, 2021b, pp. 125-127). This internal diversity further complicates the Holy See engagement with the EU, as it must navigate a fragmented landscape of national religious cultures and sensitivities, making it more difficult for Catholic actors to speak to a unified audience or to embed their values consistently across EU policymaking channels.

However, it is interesting to note that the values emphasized by Catholic actors in Brussels are generally understood and accepted by EU actors as generic humanitarian principles once and as long as they are removed from their theological foundations. Not by chance, Piotr Mazurkiewicz (2020, p. 1) argues that the EU has often transformed religious matters into secular ones to make them fit within the institutional logic, while McCrea (2020, p. 307) observes that the EU policy-making carefully delinks religious values from their theological origins, blending Christian heritage with secular humanism. This creates a clear challenge for the Catholic advocacy community, whose translation of Catholic general principles into actionable policy elements must then resonate with both its doctrinal roots and the EU secular policy logics. As such, even the most coordinated, value-driven engagement may face structural resistance within EU institutions: this constraint will be further explored in the next chapter's discussion on the impacts of the Holy See soft power initiatives towards the EU.

In conclusion, the analysis of the Holy See presence, papal discourse, and Catholic advocacy in Brussels supports the hypothesis: the religious polity and Catholic actors in Brussels have developed a structured and adaptive engagement strategy towards the EU since Maastricht, rooted in soft power rather than material leverage. By mobilizing moral authority, symbolic framing, and coordinated advocacy, they have sought to insert value-based contributions into the EU policy sphere, even as their strategies remain conditioned by the Union's secular and pluralistic framework.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION – MAPPING THE HOLY SEE INFLUENCE ON EUROPEAN INTEGRATION SINCE 1992

This chapter deepens the analytical work of the previous sections by providing a thematic discussion of the Holy See engagement with the European Union following the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Building on the mapping of strategies, tools, and policy foci of the religious polity and the Catholic actors in Brussels presented in Chapter 4, attention now shifts to a reflection and evaluation of the influence they bear. In particular, the chapter aims to understand how this influence compares to that of other interest representation actors within the EU's complex institutional landscape, how it manifests more broadly, and how its visibility and effectiveness vary depending on the policy sector. The added value of this discussion thus lies in its broader scope and reflective approach: by delving deeper into these dynamics, the chapter contributes to a more contextual understanding of the relevance of the Holy See and the network of Catholic organizations and associations in Brussels.

The discussion unfolds in four sections. The preamble (section 5.0) will outline the institutional changes introduced by Maastricht and their implications for Catholic actors' engagement with the EU. Section 5.1 will compare the advocacy conducted by Catholic actors with the broader landscape of interest groups in Brussels, examining strategies, access, and resources in the aforementioned period. Section 5.2 will then assess the extent of their influence, either discursive, procedural, or substantive, while Section 5.3 will turn to how influence has varied across the 5 policy areas analyzed in this thesis, namely migration and asylum, environmental and sustainability policy, socioeconomic rights, education policy, and external relations, identifying patterns of success and constraint.

To guide this analysis, a second hypothesis is introduced: *since 1992, a morality-anchored model has given Catholic actors in Brussels comparative strength in discursive and procedural arenas and only selective, often long-run, substantive payoffs, varying by sector according to EU competence and technocratic demand*. Ultimately, this chapter underscores the importance of analyzing the Holy See and Catholic organizations in Brussels not as isolated phenomena, but as uniquely positioned actors within a crowded policy field, reading their engagement through EU policy logics. Therefore, it moves from mapping to consequences, beginning with the Maastricht turning point before tracing influence across institutions and sectors since 1992.

5.0 The Maastricht turning point for advocacy

To properly situate Catholic interest representation in Brussels after 1992, it is first necessary to understand how the Maastricht Treaty redefined the EU's institutional framework and, consequently, the lobbying practices of the stakeholders participating in it. While European-wide interest groups have existed since the early days of the EC in sectors where the policy-making responsibility had been given to the Commission by the Treaty of Rome, namely agriculture as well as coal and steel, the first real change occurred with the 1986 Single European Act (SEA) when the locus of policy-making power in an increasing number of policy areas shifted from the national to the supranational level (Coen, 1997b, pp. 94-96; Mazey & Richardson, 1993, pp. 3-5). However, lobbying remained comparatively limited, informal, and business-focused, revolving mostly around the technocratic need of the Commission for expertise (Coen, 1997b, pp. 94-96; Coen, 2007, pp. 5-8). Furthermore, while the European Parliament emerged as more open to lobbying, this body was still mostly consultative, its outcomes seemed unpredictable, and the cost of non-participation was low (Coen, 2007, p. 7). Therefore, the Council remained the decisive arena, and organized interests focused primarily on supplying technical information to Commission officials, leaving very few channels for civil society and faith-based organizations to intervene.

The Maastricht treaty altered the EU interest representation arena in two ways for Catholic actors. First, the new pillar structure provided a more institutionalized division of competencies between supranational and intergovernmental domains, opening new doors in some areas while relegating religious engagement to the background in others (Dinan, 2014, p. 236). Under the first supranational pillar, interest representation was increasingly professionalized through Commission consultations and new entry points, enabling Catholic actors in Brussels to make their voice heard more systematically, as reflected in the growing frequency of Commission meetings with Catholic Church representatives (Coen, 2007, p. 9; Leustean, 2013, p. 22). By contrast, as mentioned by Dinan (2014, pp. 239-242), the second and third pillars remained largely intergovernmental in nature, characterized by Council dominance and scarce consultation: this naturally limited the role of Catholic actors to a more symbolic one. Second, the Treaty of Maastricht empowered the European Parliament through the co-decision procedure by gradually transforming it into a co-legislator with the Council and consequently a new target for interest representation actors (Coen, 2007, p. 10). This also resulted in greater professionalization of Catholic advocacy, as demonstrated by the increase in Catholic bodies establishing offices in Brussels soon after 1992 (Leustean, 2013, p. 11). In this sense, the Maastricht Treaty marked the first real turning point for the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels: by combining the procedural openings of the supranational pillar with the Parliament's new legislative

weight, they could begin to move from occasional, symbolic interventions towards sustained participation in EU policymaking. These dynamics laid the groundwork for the subsequent consolidation of their role, culminating with the Lisbon Treaty (2009) and Article 17 TFEU, which formalized and stabilized dialogue between the EU and churches, giving Catholic actors a recognized and durable institutional platform (Liedhegener, 2013, p. 194). Having outlined these institutional shifts, the next step is thus to assess how Catholic advocacy compares with other actors operating in the post-Maastricht interest representation environment.

5.1 Comparing Catholic influence with other interest groups in the EU

To fully understand the nature and reach of the Catholic network's engagement with the EU post-1992, it is essential to consider its position within the broader landscape of interest representation in Brussels. This comparison is highly relevant for this thesis as it allows for a deeper assessment of how the approach of Catholic actors fits within the EU environment of interest representation in the aforementioned time period. It was shown how the Holy See and Catholic actors like COMECE, JRS Europe, CIDSE, and Caritas Europa have developed diverse yet complementary strategies in Brussels, ranging from formal dialogue under Article 17 TFEU to advocacy based on symbolic communication and grassroots experience (Barbato, 2013, pp. 27, 42-43; Driessen, 2021, pp. 1-3). However, these actors do not operate in a vacuum: the EU policy-making process is shaped by a wide variety of different stakeholders, including business lobbies, civil society organizations, trade unions, and professional networks (Greenwood, 2011, p. 11). While Chapter 3 offered a range of conceptual frameworks to understand how this system works, this section brings those perspectives into dialogue with the empirical realities of Catholic advocacy in Brussels, detailed in Chapter 4. Therefore, section 5.1 will situate the Holy See and its network of actors within this pluralist ecosystem, comparing and contrasting its model of value-driven engagement with more conventional forms of interest representation and what this reveals about both its capacities and constraints.

Firstly, traditional interest groups in Brussels, such as corporate lobbies, professional associations, and secular NGOs, typically operate within a well-established framework of interest representation, offering types of resources and information (technical expertise, broad societal input, and alignment with EU or national priorities) that are valued differently by each European institution in exchange for access (Bouwen, 2002, pp. 369-370, 379-382). In other words, these actors shape legislative proposals and regulatory outcomes by relying on professionalized advocacy, proximity to the institutions, and significant technical as well as financial resources. From this perspective, the Holy

See and the network of Catholic associations resemble traditional lobbying actors as they draw on their sectoral insights to contribute to informed and value-oriented recommendations (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, p. 66). However, they do not provide narrow technical input or sector-specific expertise akin to business lobbies or consultancies, as their engagement with the EU institutions has been increasingly focused on moral framing, ethical discourse, and normative alignment (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, p. 66).

In this regard, the way the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels have engaged with EU institutions after 1992 strongly resonates with the theory on transnational advocacy networks (TANs), describing the mechanisms through which value-driven actors exert their influence worldwide (Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 14). The use of symbolic politics has, in fact, been widely employed to make their voice heard at the EU level (Nardella, 2017, pp. 11-12). For instance, the credibility of JRS Europe stems from its first-hand testimonies and ethical appeals, using real-life stories to influence the EU policy discussions, while COMECE helps translate Catholic values into actionable language in the main fields of Catholic engagement (JRS Europe, 2024c, pp. 3-6; Turner, 2013, pp. 82-83). Therefore, these dynamics resonate less with legislative efficiency and economic competitiveness than with normative aspirations, exemplifying how the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels operate differently from traditional lobbies and more in line with transnational advocacy networks.

While these patterns set Catholic actors apart from their counterparts in Brussels concerning framing and normative orientation, this should not obscure certain points of convergence. Like many other organizations in Brussels, the Holy See and its network adopt a combination of insider and outsider strategies, as conceptualized by De Bruycker and Beyers (2019, pp. 57-58): while participating in formal mechanisms, including Article 17 TFEU dialogues, stakeholder consultations, and Commission hearings, they also engage in more public-facing forms of advocacy, including papal speeches, symbolic messaging, and coalition-building across civil society. In this respect, Catholic actors are embedded within the pluralist and increasingly professionalized system of EU interest representation described by Greenwood (2011, p. 11), where legitimacy and influence often depend on navigating institutional norms and procedural channels. However, while reflecting an adaptation to structural norms of EU governance, these similarities do not override the shown substantial differences in how Catholic actors pursue interest, namely through moral authority, ethical framing, and transnational solidarity.

Although this places them somewhat closer to secular NGOs, important distinctions also remain compared to the latter: while operating side by side in Brussels and sometimes pursuing overlapping policy goals, their sources of legitimacy, institutional affiliations, and modes of influence remain distinct. Specifically, Catholic organizations are rooted in theological views and operationalize the general messages of the Church and the Pope, also enjoying a unique status under Article 17 of the TFEU, which grants them formalized dialogue with EU institutions (Samsudean, 2019, p. 169; Wilton, 2013, p. 91). In practice, what distinguishes their activities is the reference to Catholic values and the support of the churches, which offer wide access to volunteer networks, deep community ties, and knowledge of local social needs through clerical staff on the ground (Samsudean, 2019, p. 169). Their engagement thus traditionally combines pastoral care with advocacy, reflecting a dual commitment to spiritual and social missions, in contrast to secular NGOs, which rely more on technical expertise, legal frameworks, and professionalized advocacy structures (Samsudean, 2019, pp. 169-171).

Ultimately, the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels demonstrate key strengths that set them apart within the framework of EU policy-making. Firstly, they have the ability to frame policy debates in terms of ethical principles, long-term societal values, and the common good more generally, thus providing a normative dimension that often lacks in the technocratic discourse (Böllmann, 2013, p. 211). Secondly, echoing Keck and Sikkink's (1998) TANs theory, they benefit from a well-established and multi-level network based on cooperation between different actors, enabling sustained engagement on multiple fronts and enhancing their credibility. Thirdly, their consistent institutional presence and moral authority allow them to be particularly vocal in value-laden areas of EU policy, such as social justice, migration, and development. (Böllmann, 2013, p. 211; Samsudean, 2019, p. 162).

However, the Catholic network in Brussels also faces some limitations, compared to traditional interest groups: the EU lobbying environment privileges technical expertise, sector-specific knowledge, and quantifiable outcomes, which may place religious actors at a disadvantage (Wilton, 2013, pp. 95-96). Moreover, the EU's corporatist tradition favors structured dialogue over conventional lobbying, meaning that religious organizations are often integrated through formalized consultations rather than assertive lobbying strategies like in the US, which limits their leverage compared to more professionalized secular actors (Mihut, 2011, pp. 79-80). Finally, the explicitly religious framing of Catholic advocacy often faces resistance in the EU's increasingly secular and pluralistic institutional environment, requiring actors to translate their values into secular terms,

thereby diminishing their theological distinctiveness and constraining their influence in more technocratic or ideologically contested policy areas (Mazurkiewicz, 2020, p. 1; McCrea, 2020, p. 307).

In sum, while the Holy See and its affiliated Catholic actors occupy a unique space within the EU's pluralist system of interest representation, their influence operates through distinct moral and transnational channels rather than conventional lobbying norms. This comparison underscores both their added normative value and the structural constraints they face in navigating a policy environment that increasingly privileges technical expertise and secular discourse.

5.2 The extent of the Holy See and catholic actors' influence in EU policy debates

Having situated Catholic action within the wider Brussels ecosystem, attention will now be turned to assessing the overall extent of its influence on EU policy debates. In order for this to happen, it is necessary to go beyond the analytical mapping of Chapter 4 to a more in-depth discussion of how Catholic actions translate into influence within the Union's governance framework. At this point, it is no longer a question of whether the Holy See and Catholic actors are present in the EU policy-making arena, but of establishing the kind of effect they have had and have. To capture this, the following discussion will distinguish between three interrelated dimensions of influence: discursive, procedural, and substantive. This division will thus assess in which of these three dimensions Catholic actions in Brussels carry the greatest weight, and where it faces limitations instead, thus laying the groundwork for the subsequent sectoral discussion of section 5.3.

5.2.1 Discursive influence

Discursive power represents the most significant dimension of the Holy See and Catholic actors' influence on the EU policy-making arena. This mechanism operates most notably through the logics of structural framing and narrative creation. In this sense, Catholic actors in Brussels behave similarly to TANs, which employ various tactics, including symbolic politics, not only "to influence policy outcomes but [also] to transform the terms and nature of the debate" (Keck & Sikkink, 1999, p. 90).

Firstly, through structural framing, the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels have consistently used the lenses of human dignity, solidarity, and justice, drawing from traditional Catholic values as much as from recent encyclicals like Laudato Si', to frame issues in relation to the common good (Kratochvíl & Doležal, 2015, p. 117). This framework resonates well with the EU's identity as a

normative power promoting values like peace, liberty, democracy, and the rule of law, as explained by Ian Manners (2002, p. 242). In this sense, the Catholic actors in Brussels manage to recast issues in ethical and moral terms, aligning them well with the EU's own claim to act as a normative power, grounded in values and principles, thus increasing their discursive influence noteworthy.

Secondly, the Catholic network engaging with the EU harnesses narrative creation to gain discursive influence. Not by chance, it has been shown by several authors that the persuasiveness of advocacy depends on the strength of the arguments as well as congruence with wider public opinion: Dür (2019, p. 514) demonstrates that public attitudes are more influenced by robust and well-framed arguments than the authority or credibility of the source alone while De Bruycker and Hanegraaff (2024, p. 31) complement this by arguing that while economic resources matter in lobbying, they become most effective when coupled with alignment to the majority of public opinion. In Brussels, however, the economic power of business groups and professional associations tends to exceed that of civil society organizations like the Catholic ones (Ruohonen, 2019). For instance, industry lobbies such as BusinessEurope command significant financial and technical resources, allowing them to maintain large secretariats in Brussels and exert strong influence on regulatory debates (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 77-79). This does not mean that Catholic actors are underfunded per se, but they simply cannot match the budget of corporate actors. Therefore, their leverage must stem from the ability to craft persuasive narratives by mobilizing testimony, storytelling, and grassroots experiences, which resonate with shared with broadly shared ethical and humanitarian values.

Overall, these mechanisms show that Catholic actors exercise discursive influence by framing EU policy debates in ethical terms and reinforcing them through persuasive narratives, shaping how issues are understood within the EU context.

5.2.2 Procedural influence

Beyond shaping discourse, the Catholic network in Brussels has managed to exert some procedural influence on EU policy-making (denoted here as effects on access, agenda, timing, and consultative status, rather than on the final content of binding acts) thanks to its access to formalized consultation mechanisms and institutional procedures. Firstly, Catholicism enjoys a unique kind of engagement with the Union compared to other religions, thanks to the presence of the Apostolic Nunciature on site: the figure of the nuncio, already discussed at length, has historically provided an unmatched connection to EU political leaders and decision-makers, granting it entry into high-level dialogues normally reserved for state representatives (Leustean, 2014, pp. 190-203). While this role is clearly

more symbolic in nature, with limited actual impact on EU legislation, it nevertheless grants the religious polity a unique place within the EU institutional framework, complemented by the consultations with Catholic associations and NGOs.

On their part, Catholic organizations enjoy a different kind of procedural access compared to the Holy See, but pivotal nonetheless. In fact, Article 17 of the TFEU represents a peculiar channel of engagement establishing a direct dialogue between the EU and churches, religious associations, and philosophical organizations, thus placing Catholic associations such as COMECE in a unique position (Samsudean, 2019, p. 169; Wilton, 2013, p. 91). Furthermore, Catholic organizations regularly engage with EU institutions through consultations, expert hearings, and stakeholder dialogues, such as JRS Europe, in the context of migration policies (JRS Europe, 2024a, pp. 24-25). The presence of these organizations in these EU settings reflects the insider dimension of their strategy, and, when coupled with the Holy See diplomatic representation, it reinforces the Catholic network's special procedural status within the EU policy arena.

However, procedural influence is not unlimited: participation in consultation does not automatically lead to leverage over policy outcomes, especially since the EU policy-making arena is highly crowded and extremely competitive. In fact, EU interest representation has become more professionalized, accompanied by the necessity to provide technical expertise (Greenwood, 2011, pp. 26-28). For faith-based actors, this emerges as an important challenge: as demonstrated by Foret and Mourão Permoser (2015, p. 1089) in the field of immigration, religious organizations, including Catholic ones, often participate procedurally with an ethical voice, but their inputs frequently require translation into secular policy language, limiting their direct impact. More generally, there is evidence that NGOs, including Catholic ones, tend to be included in EU consultations on a wide variety of topics, albeit without shaping the final outcomes (Dür and De Bièvre, 2007a, p. 79). Therefore, while Catholic contributions to the procedural debates are acknowledged, they often cannot match the technical expertise needed in EU policy discussions, with their role remaining closer to that of consultees, offering important legitimacy and value-based contributions. Accordingly, the primary payoffs of procedural influence lie in agenda access, recognition, and contributions to the quality of the decision-making process (Bouwen, 2002, p. 370; European Commission, 2021a, p. 21; Schmidt, 2020, pp. 1-2); whether such access converts into changes in binding texts will be the focus of the next section.

5.2.3 Substantive influence

While discursive and procedural channels allow the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels to engage consistently with EU institutions, their substantive influence, defined here as the conversion of access and participation into observable changes in binding outputs or into durable commitments, remains limited due to a number of reasons.

Firstly, the very way EU power is structured imposes important constraints on Catholic action. In fact, the competences of the Union, as enshrined in the Treaties, are divided into three categories: exclusive (where only the EU legislates, such as trade, competition, Eurozone monetary policy), shared (where both member states and the supranational level can take the initiative, with EU authority thus being more constrained, like the internal market, social policy, and the environment), and supporting (where EU action is only complements national measures through harmonization, such as education, culture and health) (European Union, 2022). All the other competences remain in the hands of member states, and the Union can only ensure coordination for some of them, including common foreign and security policy (European Union, 2022). Crucially, the domains where the Holy See and Catholic associations in Brussels are particularly vocal, i.e., the five analyzed in this thesis (namely migration, environment, socioeconomic rights, education and external action), fall entirely within shared, supportive, or coordinating competences, thereby limiting the ability of religious actors to shape substantive legislative outcomes.

Furthermore, Catholic actors face obstacles when attempting to attain tangible outcomes. Beyond the aforementioned need to translate Catholic values into secular, technocratic terms to gain traction, as explained by Foret and Mourão Permoser (2015, p. 1089), this is also the result of a difference in the modes of influence recognized within the EU. As argued by Schmidt (2020, pp. 1-2), the EU's democratic legitimacy depends on three dimensions: input (i.e., citizen representation), output (namely, effective policy results), and throughput (that is, the quality of governance processes that connect societal demands to political outcomes). While businesses and professional associations engage EU institutions with a greater focus on output, through technical expertise and concrete regulatory impact, religious organizations, including Catholic ones, contribute primarily to input and throughput by articulating ethical perspectives and fostering inclusive dialogue (Coen, 1997a, p. 24; Dür and De Bièvre, 2007a, p. 79). While all three forms of legitimacy matter for the Union, in practice, influence over substantive legislative outcomes tends to reward output-oriented contributions, especially with the Commission, which relies heavily on evidence-based input and technical expertise from lobbyists (De Bruycker & Hanegraaff, 2024, p. 31). This helps explain why

Catholic actors remain more visible in shaping debates and legitimizing processes than in determining final policy results.

However, when assessing the substantive influence of the Holy See and Catholic actors on EU policy-making, the temporal dimension should also be taken into consideration. In fact, while the Catholic network rarely has the power to alter legislative text in the short term, as shown above, their normative input can leave a mark over the longer term, through soft law instruments, policy declarations or incremental norm diffusion, which represent a pervasive feature of EU governance, valued for its ability to steer behavior indirectly (Ausfelder et al., 2024, pp. 682-683; Ștefan, 2024, p. 671). In sum, by spreading their values through the shown non-binding instruments, Catholic actors contribute to shaping the ethical environment of policymaking, thus focusing less on the immediate legislative change and more on the incremental norm setting in the evolving EU governance framework.

5.3 Patterns of influence in different policy sectors

This section now turns to a more fine-grained analysis of how the influence of the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels after 1992 has varied depending on the EU thematic field, with the discussion focusing on the five areas highlighted in this thesis, namely migration, sustainability, socioeconomic issues, education, and external relations. In fact, while it was previously shown that the Catholic network has developed a structured, multi-level, and value-based engagement strategy towards the EU institutions, its visibility and effectiveness are not evenly distributed across all policy areas. Rather, the extent of their success in shaping debates or policies depends on a series of sectoral dynamics, including the openness of EU institutions to normative arguments, the degree of technocratic complexity, and the overlap between Catholic values and EU priorities (Kratochvíl, & Doležal, 2013, pp. 22-23; Mazurkiewicz, 2020, p. 1; Mudrov, 2014, p. 3; Turner, 2012, pp. 244-245). Building on the empirical material previously discussed, this section identifies where Catholic actors have found greater resonance and influence, and where their role remains more peripheral or symbolic. In doing so, it offers a clearer understanding of the Holy See role as a moral interlocutor of the EU and shows how Catholic actors fit within the broader patterns of influence across different EU policy areas.

5.3.1 Migration and Asylum Policy

Among the five domains of EU policy-making analyzed in this thesis, migration and asylum emerge as the area where Catholic influence has been exerted most visibly and in a sustained fashion over

the years. Chapter 4 showed how organizations such as COMECE and JRS Europe combine grassroots experience with moral authority to engage EU institutions on issues such as detention, asylum reforms, and reception models, bridging core Catholic values of human dignity, hospitality, and care for the vulnerable with the EU's normative commitments to human rights and protection (COMECE, 2023b, pp. 1-2; JRS Europe, 2024b, pp. 2-4).

The first factor explaining their visibility in this domain is their ability to intervene at different stages of EU policymaking. Catholic actors have, in fact, used a combination of position papers, testimony-based campaigns, and participation in consultation processes to challenge EU securitization trends and promote alternative approaches centered on solidarity and inclusion (COMECE, 2023b, pp. 1-2; *JRS Europe*, 2024a, pp. 24-25; *2024*b, *pp. 2-4;* 2024c, pp. 3-6). This strategy proved particularly salient in the 2015 refugee crisis when Catholic and other faith-based organizations leveraged ethical framing and their embedded local governance to shape the debate around the EU's response (Lyck-Bowen & Owen, 2019, pp. 21-23). The strength of this approach thus lies in the combination of moral legitimacy and field-based insight, which enabled the Catholic network in Brussels to provide a credible alternative to the dominant security-driven narratives in EU migration governance.

Secondly, the nature of their influence in this domain corresponds closely to the logic of transnational advocacy networks (TANs), as theorized by Keck and Sikkink (1998), in which symbolic politics, accountability framing, and coalition-building are key tools of value-driven actors, rather than material resources or technical expertise. JRS Europe's storytelling campaigns and COMECE's norm-based contributions exemplify how Catholic actors in Brussels do not limit themselves to policy criticism but also seek to shape the moral vocabulary through which migration is framed at the EU level, thereby exercising discursive influence (Hollerich, 2022, pp. 1-2; JRS Europe, 2024c, pp. 3-6). Unlike business lobbies or think tanks, they do not rely on technocratic solutions but offer discursive resources that influence how policy problems are understood.

Thirdly, in the domain of migration, Catholic actors have benefitted from their hybrid position linking grassroots realities and institutional frameworks: by engaging in consultations with the Commission and the Parliament as well as with broader civil society, they provide legitimacy- and inclusiveness-based inputs, often sought by EU institutions, exemplifying a form of procedural influence (JRS Europe, 2024a, pp. 24-25; Mudrov, 2017, p. 68). In this regard, Intropido (2023, p. 1) highlights how the Roman Catholic Church often acts as a mediator in migration governance, translating humanitarian experience into normative advocacy within secular institutional environments like the

EU. Therefore, this middle ground position has placed these actors in a particularly advantaged position to make their voice heard and remain influential in this domain, both in formal and informal settings.

In short, while the network of Catholic actors in Brussels has rarely shaped the substantive content of binding EU asylum legislation, their sustained engagement with EU institutions over the years has shaped the framing of migration policies. By promoting their vision based on ethics, dignity, and solidarity, they have provided important contributions to the normative environment, making migration one of the policy domains where their value-based strategy has resonated most strongly.

5.3.2 Environmental and Sustainability Policy

Another area in which the voice of Catholic actors has been particularly influential recently, in the EU as much as worldwide, is that of environmental sustainability. In fact, this topic has become increasingly shaped by moral considerations and long-term ethical and societal frameworks, thus placing them in a particularly favorable condition to play a growing role (Christie et al., 2019, p. 1343). In their relations with EU institutions, Catholic organizations like CIDSE and COMECE have been particularly vocal about the environmental and sustainability cause, in line with the values of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) on the Common Good and Social Love, as prominently articulated by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which provided the theological basis of their engagement (Christie et al., 2019, p. 1343; Silecchia, 2016, pp. 371-374).

The strength of the Catholic network in Brussels in this sector lies firstly in its capacity to exercise discursive influence by introducing normative arguments which enrich the EU discourse on sustainability with ethical depth. As explained by Klinkenborg and Fuchs (2022, p. 83), faith-based actors (FBAs), including Catholic ones, contribute importantly to the discussion by establishing a link between environmental responsibility and deeply rooted values, including the belief that humans, as caretakers of the planet, have the responsibility to protect both the environment and one another. This moral grounding allows Catholic actors to see the environmental issue through the lenses of integral ecology, intergenerational justice, and universal destination of goods, aligning closely with EU values (Klinkenborg & Fuchs, 2022, p. 92). Therefore, through the position papers and interventions, Catholic organizations, most notably COMECE and CIDSE, have managed to frame the debate, not in technical terms but as a question of moral responsibility and collective purpose, reinforcing the ethical vocabulary through which EU sustainability policy is discussed.

Secondly, the strength of Catholic actors in this domain derives from their ability to amplify their influence through procedural channels and coalition-building rather than acting in isolation, combining their knowledge on the issue (Jesuit European Social Centre [JESC], 2024). Joint platforms like the European Laudato Si' Alliance (ELSiA), co-founded in 2019 by COMECE and including Catholic associations like Caritas Europa, CIDSE, JESC, Justice and Peace Europe, Don Bosco International, and the Laudato Si' Movement (almost all of which entered the EU Transparency Register and have an office in Brussels) enable a coordinated and values-based engagement with EU institutions on sustainability and environmental issues, in attempt to "bring the encyclical letter *Laudato Si'* to life" (O'Beara, 2024, p. 156). Their success in this domain was exemplified by the organization of an event on the apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum* and the EU Green transition, which saw the participation of EU officials and church representatives in an attempt to find common ground and explore potential synergies in addressing climate change and protecting the common good (O'Beara, 2024, p. 156). Such initiatives show how the Catholic network in Brussels has increasingly gained recognition and agenda access within the EU environmental policies in recent years, even if their contributions remain chiefly normative in nature.

However, in spite of their significant voice in discursive and procedural arenas around sustainability and environmental issues, the substantive influence of Catholic actors in the technical EU policy-making arena in this domain remains limited, due to the highly technocratic and expert-driven nature of the latter. In fact, Salter and Wilkinson (2024, p. 105) demonstrate that the focus of faith-based actors approaching climate issues is generally normative and moral, thus constraining their capacity to influence more specific decisions on details like emission targets or legal mechanisms. Consequently, the impact of Catholic actors in the environmental and sustainability domain in Brussels is strongest in public discourse and agenda-setting, where Catholic values match overarching EU priorities, but remains limited when it comes to shaping legally-binding instruments.

5.3.3 Socioeconomic rights

Socioeconomic rights represent another area where Catholic actors in Brussels have attempted to shape the EU discourse for a long time, albeit with less visibility than in the migration domain and less coalition leverage than in the sustainability and environmental field. The basis of their engagement is once again Catholic principles of dignity of work, solidarity, and the preferential option for the poor, as mostly outlined in Catholic Social Teaching (CST) (Turner, 2012, pp. 237-238). These values are in close alignment with the EU's social dimension, notably the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which sets the Union's priorities for employment, inclusion, and poverty

reduction, among other things (European Parliament et al., pp. 4-9). Therefore, the strength of Catholic actors in Brussels engaged in this domain stems firstly from a discursive influence and alignment on these issues: the long-standing position of COMECE, Caritas Europa, and CIDSE on justice, dignity, and poverty reinforces and legitimizes the normative vocabulary already employed in EU discourses.

Furthermore, Catholic actors in Brussels have gained particular traction in this area thanks to their alignments with the procedural logics of interest representation in the EU. Grassroots testimony by Caritas and CIDSE, together with COMECE's reports, constitutes what Bouwen (2002, p. 370) calls "access goods", namely information about domestic and encompassing interests required by EU institutions to provide their policies with legitimacy. This is exemplified by the fact that the final text of the EPSR was the result of multi-level consultations held by the Commission, which saw the involvement of civil society, social partners, and the general public, with Catholic actors providing a key social and moral input (Carella & Graziano, 2021, pp. 374-376). In this sense, their ability to stand out in this EU pluralist policy environment lies in their capacity to channel community experience into policy debates.

However, all these elements do not necessarily translate into substantive influence, as Catholic impact here is heavily limited by the structural features of the EU socioeconomic governance. Firstly, the EU has increasingly evolved into a regulatory state, as explained by Majone (1996, p. 55), privileging budget discipline and technocratic oversight over redistributive priorities. Secondly and consequently, the EU's social policy is inevitably influenced and constrained by economic priorities, with instruments like the Stability and Growth Pact or the European Semester being largely insulated from value-based advocacy (Bilbao-Ubillos, 2022, p. 267). Therefore, the potential for Catholic actors and proposals on solidarity-driven growth to lead to binding outcomes remains relatively low, despite being often consulted on these issues. Therefore, Catholic influence in the social domain resembles migration in its reliance on grassroots testimony and service provision but has been less vocal and visible than in asylum debates, while differing from the environmental field, where coalition-building and transnational networks have been more decisive.

5.3.4 Education Policy

Catholic engagement in the EU education policy is mostly limited to discursive influence, with constrained practical implications due to the few EU competences in this domain. Together with COMECE, Don Bosco International has historically been very active on this subject, due to the

Salesian order's long-standing focus on youth formation and vocational training: thanks to its office in the Belgian capital, the association has often engaged with the Commission's Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, for instance by providing a very forward-looking submission on "Migration and Mobility: Challenges and Opportunities for EU Education Systems" in 2008 (Turner, 2013, p. 78). At the same time, several consultations between EU institutions and Catholic Church representatives over the past two decades (especially since 1990, following Delors' call to give the Union a "heart and soul") have included dialogue on topics such as education and intercultural understanding, although these encounters have remained primarily symbolic (Pavlovic, 2013, pp. 110, 113).

In any case, the main source of constraint for Catholic actors in the EU education policy remains the principle of subsidiarity in this domain, limiting EU-level action to support, coordination, and benchmarking while leaving the design of education systems and binding decisions related to them firmly in the hands of member states (European Parliament, 2025). Indeed, this is underlined by the evolution of the EU education policy: omitted completely from the Treaty of Rome, this domain began to appear in action programs in the 1970s, only to be incorporated into the treaties with Maastricht and while the Commission has been able to promote initiatives like Erasmus+ fostering greater cooperation, it still lacks the authority impose harmonized legislation or binding policy outcomes (St. John & Murphy, 2019, pp. 3–4). Consequently, Catholic actors in this field have contributed discursively to EU debates and programs but remain marginal in terms of procedural access and have virtually no substantive impact on binding education policy.

5.3.5 External Relations

In the field of external relations, the influence of the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels has remained more symbolic than substantive, following a similar path to that of education. In fact, the Holy See diplomacy is influenced more by its religious mission than conventional statecraft, with its key priorities being peace, freedom, and human rights, which often guide the engagement on secondary issues as well (Kratochvíl and Doležal, 2015, pp. 45–48). In its relations with the EU, this translates into a dialogue with EU leaders and institutions mostly centered around conflict resolution, religious freedom, and human dignity, thus positioning the Holy See as a moral interlocutor on these issues rather than a fully-fledged foreign policy actor despite its diplomatic representation (Kratochvíl and Doležal, 2015, pp. 45–48).

Other Catholic actors in Brussels, most notably COMECE, tend to follow this approach by monitoring how the EU behaves externally in relation to the Holy See priorities and by issuing value-based statements on enlargement, humanitarian aid, and peacebuilding (COMECE, 1997, pp. 1-2; 2010, pp. 2-3; 2024b, pp. 1-2). However, the main issue is represented by the intergovernmental character of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, which leaves very limited procedural entry points for non-state or religious actors and reduces the chances of substantive impact (European Union, 2022). Catholic engagement in this field has thus remained mostly discursive, contributing to legitimacy and ethical framing more than substantive policy outcomes, mirroring the pattern observed with education.

In conclusion, this chapter supports the hypothesis: since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels have attained the greatest traction through discursive framing and increased procedural access, with only a few selective, often long-run, substantive effects (usually normative in nature), with their influence varying according to EU competences and technocratic demand. Mapping these patterns across migration, environment, socioeconomic rights, education, and external relations revealed a consistent morality-anchored model adopted by Catholic actors whose resonance with the EU policy-making arena varies according to the alignment between ethical narratives and institutional entry points. Therefore, this chapter highlighted both the added normative value Catholic actors bring to EU governance and the structural constraints that set clear limits to their influence.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to address the research question: *How have the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels sought to influence European integration since the Maastricht Treaty?* The research was thus guided by two hypotheses: first, that *since 1992, the Holy See and Catholic actors have developed a structured and adaptive engagement strategy in Brussels, leveraging moral authority and value-based messaging to attempt to influence the EU policy discourse despite institutional and normative constraints*; second, that *since 1992, a morality-anchored model has given Catholic actors in Brussels comparative strength in discursive and procedural arenas and only selective, often long-run, substantive payoffs, varying by sector according to EU competence and technocratic demand*. In order to test them, this research adopted a combination of discourse and institutional analysis, examining the Catholic engagement with the European Union across five major policy domains, namely migration, environmental sustainability, socioeconomic rights, education, and external relations, through a qualitative and interdisciplinary framework.

Chapter 4 demonstrated that the Holy See and the Catholic associations in Brussels have engaged the EU institutions through a structured and multi-layered strategy since the Maastricht Treaty. At the diplomatic and symbolic level, the Apostolic Nunciature to the EU, papal encyclicals, speeches, and visits over the years have provided a permanent channel of dialogue, positioning the Holy See as both a sovereign actor and moral interlocutor. At the advocacy layer, Catholic associations, notably COMECE, JRS Europe, Caritas Europa, and CIDSE, contributed by translating Catholic values, as generally articulated by the popes, into policy-oriented elements. In fact, through a combination of policy recommendations, grassroots mobilization, and people-centered testimonies, they reinforced overall Catholic engagement towards the EU, ensuring that Catholic moral and normative principles are reframed in terms that resonate with EU institutions. Therefore, despite their institutional independence and the European Union's secular framework, this adaptive and multi-level ecosystem of converging narratives and initiatives revealed a Catholic soft-power strategy in Brussels based on moral authority and value-based messaging, thus supporting the first hypothesis.

Chapter 5 examined the extent of the Holy See and Catholic associations' influence on the EU policy-making process since Maastricht by distinguishing between discursive, procedural, and substantive dimensions, and by analyzing patterns across the five selected policy domains. Discursive influence emerged as the strongest due to Catholic actors' consistent framing of EU debates in ethical terms and their adoption of persuasive narratives, shaping how issues are understood. Procedural influence has grown steadily since 1992, especially following the institutionalization of religious dialogue

under Article 17 TFEU with the Lisbon Treaty, providing the Catholic network greater recognition and agenda access within the EU. By contrast, substantive influence has remained selective: while rarely influencing binding legislative text, Catholic actors have and continue to contribute to the long-term shaping of the ethical environment of policy-making through norm diffusion centered on soft law and non-binding frameworks.

Furthermore, these dynamics manifested unevenly across the EU policy sectors analyzed. Migration emerged as the area of greatest visibility for the Catholic network, as COMECE and JRS Europe have shaped debates by contrasting securitization with their human-centered approaches. Sustainability has become increasingly receptive to Catholic input, especially following the promulgation of Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*, as alliances such as the European Laudato Si' Alliance amplified their voice and created synergies with the EU's overarching priorities on the subject, though their influence has remained concentrated in public discourse and agenda setting. Socioeconomic rights have seen the Catholic network's priorities, often based on grassroots experience, align with those of the EU's social agenda, particularly in the European Pillar of Social Rights, with their leverage limited by the EU's structural economic needs nonetheless. In education and external relations, their influence has remained mostly symbolic as their voice has been repeatedly constrained by subsidiarity and the intergovernmental method of Common Foreign and Security Policy, respectively. Overall, the second hypothesis is thus supported: Catholic actors have been most effective in discursive and procedural arenas, while substantive impact has been sporadic and long-term, shaped by sectoral dynamics and institutional demand.

Ultimately, as set out from the beginning, this thesis has sought to bridge two separate bodies of scholarship: the study of the Holy See in international relations and that of interest representation in the European Union. It was thus shown that the Holy See and Catholic associations, though peculiar in nature, can be integrated into the pluralist policy-making environment of the European Union. On top of this, thanks to their moral authority, value-based advocacy, and human-based grassroots testimony, they further enrich it by strengthening the Union's normative identity and discursive legitimacy.

However, as is often the case in research, choices were made along the way, leading to potential limitations that could nevertheless open avenues for future literature on this topic. Firstly, the methodological scope is based chiefly on qualitative discourse and institutional analysis, supported by primary and secondary sources but lacking fieldwork or interviews. Future research could thus

address this shortcoming by integrating ethnographic methods, such as stakeholder interviews, thus better capturing the shades in the perception of both Catholic advocates and EU policymakers. Secondly, as mentioned in the beginning, the temporal focus concluded with the recent election of Pope Leo XVI, whose agenda towards the European Union is yet to be developed. This could represent a good starting point for future work to explore the extent to which this new pontificate will impact the Holy See and Catholic actors' priorities in Brussels, and whether continuity or change will prevail. Thirdly, the geographic scope was deliberately restricted to Catholic actors operating exclusively in Brussels, and while the impact of those acting locally is beyond the scope of this thesis, it should not be forgotten. Comparative studies could thus expand this focus by analyzing the interaction of national churches and catholic associations with EU regional policies, especially in member states where Catholicism remains socio-politically relevant. Finally, this study demonstrated how the secular and pluralistic nature of the Union and its policy-making environment imposes a structural constraint on religious engagement and influence, but whether this will continue to be the case remains to be seen. Future researchers could thus explore how this dynamic will evolve, especially as the EU is redefining its global identity amid turbulent geopolitical circumstances.

In conclusion, the engagement of the Holy See and Catholic actors in Brussels highlights how Catholicism has progressively adapted to European integration. Over time, the presence of the Catholic network has in fact shifted from symbolic representation to structured and multifaceted engagement, showing an ability to remain relevant within the Union's evolving political and institutional framework. This long trajectory of adaptation points to the continuing evolution of the Holy See-EU relations, whose future dynamics are yet to be determined as both polities face new challenges.

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