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THE HOLY SEE DESERVES A VOICE AT THE UN WHICH IS NO LOUDER THAN ANY OTHER NGO

The Roman Catholic church pursues disastrous policies worldwide.

Each year, 600,000 women die needlessly during pregnancy and childbirth. The United Nations increasingly makes decisions that will prevent these deaths. As a result of its special status, the Catholic Church has a powerful voice in these decisions. At the recent world conferences on women and population development, the Catholic Church successfully led the effort to block the inclusion of safe, legal abortion on the list of basic reproductive rights for women. It uses its voice to limit access to family planning, safe abortion - even in countries where abortion is legal - and emergency contraception - even for women who have been raped in an act of war.

Each year 5.8 million people become HIV positive and 2.5 million die from AIDS. Within the UN, the Roman Catholic church attempts to block international policy decisions that would make condom education and use a major tool in the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The Roman Catholic hierarchy has repeatedly condemned the use of condoms to prevent AIDS. Now we reveal...

HOW THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WANGLED ITS WAY INTO THE UNITED NATIONS - AND WHY MILLIONS ARE DYING AS A RESULT

Many questions have been raised about the role of the Catholic Church at the United Nations as a result of its high-profile and controversial role at international conferences. Participating as a full-fledged state actor in these conferences, the Holy See often goes against the overwhelming consensus of member states and seeks provisions in international documents that would limit the health rights of all people, but especially women.

How did the Holy See, the government of the Roman Catholic church come to enjoy this privileged position - held by no other religion - that gives it a voice at international conferences on some of the most sensitive issues of our time? Is there a difference between the Holy See, Vatican City and the Roman Catholic church? In the context of the United Nations, is the Holy See a state or a religion?

The Holy See is the spiritual and temporal government of the Roman Catholic church. It consists of the pope, the Roman Curia - the various departments and institutes that assist the pope in running the church - and the College of Cardinals. The Holy See is the government of the Vatican City.

Vatican City is the temporal residence of both the Holy See and the Roman Catholic church. It is the world's smallest "city-state" at 108.7 acres. It houses the infrastructure of the Roman Catholic church: the pope's palace, St Peter's Basilica, offices and administrative services and libraries and archives. Vatican City was created in 1929 under a treaty signed between Benito Mussolini

and Pietro Cardinale Gasparri, secretary of state to Pope Pius XI. The Lateran Treaty was designed to compensate the pope for the 1870 annexation of the Papal States, which consisted of 17,218 square miles in central Italy, and to guarantee the "indisputable sovereignty" of the Holy See by granting it physical territory.

According to Archbishop Hyginus Eugene Cardinale, a former Vatican diplomat who wrote the authoritative work on the Holy See and international relations, the Holy See "exists and operates within the international community as the juridical personification of the Church."

The Roman Catholic church is a religious society with some 1 billion adherents worldwide, with the pope at its head.

THE HOLY SEE AT THE UN

The Holy See is a Non-member State Permanent Observer at the United Nations. This is a rarely used designation shared only by Switzerland. It gives the holder some of the privileges of a state at the UN, such as being able to speak and vote at UN conferences. No other religion is granted this elevated status. Other religions participate at the UN like most other non-state entities - as non-governmental organisations.

The Holy See owes its participation in the UN to an accident of history - the membership of Vatican City to the Universal Postal Union and the International Telecommunications Union. The Vatican is a member of these unions because it owns postal and radio services. Soon after its formation, the UN invited these organisations and their members to attend UN sessions on an ad hoc basis, which the Vatican did.

Representatives of the Vatican and the Holy See began attending sessions of the UN General Assembly, the World Health Organisation and the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation in 1951 as ad hoc observers.

In 1956, the Holy See was elected a member of the UN Economic and Social Council and also became a full member of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The Catholic church was active as an ad hoc and at times formal observer at various UN bodies between 1948 and 1964, usually at its own request. In 1957, as a result of confusion regarding the use of the interchangeable use of the terms Holy See and Vatican City, the secretary-general of the UN and the Holy See reached an agreement that relationship should be henceforth understood as being between the UN and the Holy See.

In 1964, following the protocol establishing a permanent observer mission at the UN, the Holy See informed UN Secretary General U Thant that it had despatched a permanent observer to the UN's New York headquarters.

U Thant accepted the Vatican's designation and granted the Holy See Permanent Observer Status. The bar was not set very high for U Thant's acceptance of the Holy See's permanent observer status. Because permanent observer's are not officially recognised in the UN charter, the protocol for their admission developed by custom. U Thant noted of the criteria he applied in deciding whether to accept UN observers: "I have been following one line which seems to be the only possible one, that is, to accept observers when such an arrangement is proposed in the cases where the country in question is recognised diplomatically in this form or that form by a majority of UN members."

Non-member states obtain Permanent Observer status by notifying the UN secretary-general that they have appointed an observer. Unlike other entities, such as NGOs, they do not require an invitation from the General Assembly to send a permanent observer. "The secretary general acknowledges the appointment if accepted. According the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs", in deciding whether or not to afford certain facilities to a Permanent Observer, it has been the policy of the organisation to make such facilities available only to those appointed by Non-member States at the UN which are full members of one or more specialised agencies and are generally recognised by members of the United Nations."

The Holy See meets this first condition through its membership in United Nations organisations such as the International Atomic Energy Agency, but it is questionable if it met the second criterion in 1964, the year it was appointed an observer.

In 1959 only 14 states out of the 82 UN members at that time had formal relations with the Vatican. Even by 1985, only 53 countries had diplomatic relations with the Holy See. (At the same time there were 159 UN member states). The United Nations did not formalise relations with the Holy See until 1984.

No vote has ever been taken on the Holy See's presence at the UN by the General Assembly. The Holy See's membership in the UN agencies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency - which allowed it to qualify as a Non-member Permanent Observer - was also not subject to vote by the general conference.

Contrary to some claims, the Holy See was not invited to participate in the UN. Pope John Paul II confirmed that the Holy See invited itself into the UN when he noted, "Pope Pail VI initiated the formal participation of the Holy See in the United Nations Organisation, offering the co-operation of the church's spiritual and humanitarian expertise."

There is no evidence that the UN offered the Holy See membership or sought out the Holy See as a member state. In fact, the evidence is to the contrary. In addition to the historic reasons cited above, the Holy See is today not eligible for full state status at the UN because it can not carry out the security functions of the UN Charter due to its neutrality.

It was the Holy See that initiated requests to be recognised as a state in the international bodies. The Holy See wished to be admitted to the League of Nations, the precursor to the UN and reportedly "regretted its exclusion" due to concerns about its statehood status and the possibility it would have undue influence on the votes of Catholic member states.

In October 1944, the Pope inquired of US Secretary of State Cordell Hull what the conditions for membership would be for the future United Nations. Hull replied that, "the Vatican would not be capable of fulfilling all the responsibilities of membership."

HOW THE 'HOLY SEE' USES ITS STAUS AT THE UN TO RETARD PROGRESS

While not required by UN procedure, Mon-member State Permanent Observers are normally invited to attend UN conferences and participate in these conferences with "all the privileges of a state", including the right to vote. Other types of observers do not have this privilege. They may participate in the UN conferences a non-governmental organisations, which means they may observe the proceedings, but may not vote or participate in the other formal aspects of the conference.

Because UN conferences operate on consensus, the ability to disagree with the majority consensus has significant power. The official documents of the recent UN conferences on women and population and development are replete with "objections" by the Vatican to the majority consensus.

For instance, the Holy See insisted on expressing reservations on the Beijing Platform for Action, the final report of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women. It took issue with the concept of "women's rights to control their own sexuality" and "women's right to control their...fertility", asserting that these rights should be understood to refer only to "the responsible use of sexuality within marriage."

The Holy See also condemned "family planning" as "morally unacceptable" and dissociated itself from the consensus on the entire section on health, saying it gave "totally unbalanced attention to sexual and reproductive health".

Given its role at the UN, these official objections, entered formally into the final report of the conference, serve to weaken support for the conclusions of the majority. Moreover, they represent sectarian religious positions, not governmental public policy positions. This is exactly what the Vatican and its handful of allies - nations such as Libya and the Sudan that do not support full human rights for women - intend.

Non-member Permanent State Observers have other privileges not accorded to lesser types of observers, including the right to place items on the provisional agenda of the General Assembly and greater access to the plenary sessions of the UN and its main committees, as well as to the Security Council.

The Holy See is very active in the UN beyond the special conferences held every few years. In addition to sending a permanent observer to the UN headquarters in New York, it sends permanent observers to the UN offices in Geneva and Vienna, as well as to the UN Organisation for Industrial Development; UN Food and Agricultural Organisation; the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation; the Organisation of the American States and at least 13 other high powered bodies.

The activities of the Roman Catholic church have been detrimental to women throughout its history. From decrying emergency contraception for women who had been raped in Kosovo to burning boxes of condoms as AIDS ravages Africa, the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic church has allowed outdated doctrinal concerns to take priority over the lives of real people. Nowhere is that more evident than in the UN, where the Holy See insists on foisting its limited and largely rejected view of gender, sexuality and reproductive health on a world intent on creating a more progressive personal ethic that is respectful of the common good.

While the Holy See has a right to a voice at the United Nations, that voice should only be as loud as those of the other world religions. NGO status - which the International Humanist and Ethical Union possesses - would allow the Holy See to advocate for its position without the benefit of having a special platform for its views.