



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The diplomatic mission of the Vatican - permanent peace in Ukraine or service to Russia?



The visit of Pope Francis to Hungary had very pragmatic overtones, regardless of the magnificent welcome and the outdoor Mass in front of tens of thousands of people.

The head of the Catholic Church himself took care of that, speaking enthusiastically about his talks in Budapest, dominated by the war in Ukraine.

“There’s a mission that’s not public that’s under way; when it’s public I’ll talk about [it]”, said the Pope to journalists on the way back from Hungary, leaving behind not only breaking news, but an enigma about what kind of peace mission it was.

The Vatican is not a new player in attempts to stop Russian aggression against Ukraine, in particular to mitigate its consequences.

The Catholic Church has already mediated in an exchange of prisoners. One of the topics of conversation in Budapest was related to its commitment to the return of abducted Ukrainian children from the occupied territories.

Because of this systematic operation, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, and his Commissioner for Children's Rights, Maria Lvova-Belova, were charged by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, and an international arrest warrant was issued against them.

An ideal place for a diplomatic effort

The choice of Budapest and Hungary for the Pope's visit speaks for itself that the Vatican wants to be, if not the mediator in the peace talks between Russia and Ukraine, then at least the creator of channels through which those talks can be realised.

Hungary is a member of the EU and NATO, but it is their "disobedient" member, given that Prime Minister Orbán's policy during the Russian aggression leaves room for

communication with Moscow, and exemption from the implementation of strong Western sanctions against Russia.

If the Vatican wanted to choose a place where it could hope for good promotion and talks about the peace initiative, then it could only be Budapest.

In his conversation with Prime Minister Orbán and on other occasions during his visit to Budapest, Pope Francis highlighted an unpleasant topic for Hungary. He asked Hungary not to close its door to refugees.

Pope Francis thanked Hungary for taking in hundreds of thousands of refugees from Ukraine, but opposed the longstanding anti-migrant policy of Orbán's government, which has fenced its borders with barbed wire since 2015 to prevent migrants from the Middle East from entering.

Kyiv knew that Budapest would be a place not only for the Pope to address his spiritual children, but also a diplomatic opportunity. Kyiv sent Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal to the Vatican just a few days before the visit.

The main topic of conversation, which the Prime Minister then informed the public about, was the help of the Holy See in returning children who were abducted and deported to Russia.

But in light of Pope Francis' new statement about the ongoing secret peacekeeping mission for Ukraine, he and the Ukrainian prime minister must have had that topic on the table at the meeting on April 29.

An important meeting with the Metropolitan of the Russian Church

Pope Francis had another, admittedly short, but interesting meeting in Budapest, to which the international media did not pay much attention.

In the Apostolic Nunciature in Budapest, he spoke for about 20 minutes with Metropolitan Hilarion of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), now the archbishop of Budapest and Hungary.

Until June last year, Metropolitan Hilarion was, in fact, the second man of the Russian Orthodox Church, its "minister of foreign affairs", widely regarded as the future head and successor of current Patriarch Kirill.

However, one of the most influential bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church was deposed in June last year and sent to Hungary.

Although the conservative ROC did not publicise the reasons for this sudden move, Metropolitan Hilarion was the victim of his own silence regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine.

For the ROC and Patriarch Kirill who vocally and wholeheartedly support the attack and conquest of Ukraine, the silence of one of its most influential bishops was too much.

Since the start of aggression against Ukraine, Metropolitan Hilarion has met several Orthodox leaders with whom the Russian Church has severed spiritual communication.

He committed a special "sin" by participating in the meeting of the World Council of Churches, where the unanimous condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine was pronounced.

Pope Francis and Metropolitan Hilarion are good acquaintances and friends. They first met in March 2013, just a day after Pope Francis took office, and have met several times since then.

In the peace mission about which he spoke enigmatically, Pope Francis has an important and influential channel to the Russian Orthodox Church through Metropolitan Hilarion, even though he was punished and removed from its top echelons.

With this meeting, Pope Francis sent a clear

signal to Patriarch Kirill and the Russian Church, which has a significant influence on political decisions, that their support of and participation in the invasion of Ukraine is not acceptable.

Establishing communication channels

There are much higher expectations in Moscow than in Kyiv regarding the Pope's peace efforts.

Faced with enormous resistance from the Ukrainian defence, defeats and disorganisation within the army, as well as sanctions that are draining the economy, Russia is looking for a way out through peace talks as soon as possible.

In this sense, it suits Moscow to have a Pope, who for a long time refrained from condemning Russian aggression, and later spoke about it using the same narrative as Russia - that the attack was provoked by NATO, as a peace plan promoter.

NATO "barking" at Russia's door may have led to Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine, the Pope said after two months of war, adopting the Kremlin's rhetoric, without clearly condemning the invasion, to the astonishment of the democratic world.

Ukraine does not want to discuss peace or territorial concessions before the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine.

If the Vatican's peace mission goes in a different direction - establishing peace and putting aside the consequences of Russian territorial occupation - neither Ukraine nor its allies would be interested.

Whatever the peace mission he mentioned is about, Pope Francis has the unquestionable international authority to carry out such a mission.

This would be considerably larger than any

country, including China, which on the anniversary of the Russian aggression announced a proposal for a 12-point peace solution, which has not shown any effect to date.

The scope of the mission of the Holy See could be very limited if it takes into account the Russian motives that led to the aggression, and particularly its interests in how it would like to get out of the war it started.

The authority of Pope Francis will be confirmed as ethically correct only if his mission brings peace, which would mean the full withdrawal of Russian invasion troops from Ukraine. Anything less would be a victory for Moscow.