



By: *The Editorial Board*

# A threat from the Pentagon, a response from the Vatican – a conflict Washington could not win



In January this year, a closed meeting took place at the Pentagon between Elbridge Colby, US Undersecretary of War for Policy, and Cardinal Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States.

The meeting was not part of regular diplomatic channels, nor was it conducted through the State Department, which already gave it a different character from the outset.

According to available reports, the conversation was not routine. It was direct and politically clear. The message the cardinal received was explicit: America has the military power to do whatever it wants in the world. The Catholic Church would be better off siding with it. Avignon was also mentioned at one point.

This was not a casual historical reference or an intellectual exercise. That was the signal. That is how it was interpreted in the Vatican.

The **story** appeared this week in The Free Press, written by Mattia Ferraresi, and was further confirmed by Vatican sources cited by Christopher Hale in his newsletter Letters from Leo.

The most important aspect is not that the Pentagon denied the "characterisation" of the **meeting**; more significantly, it did not deny that the meeting took place.

Even more interesting is that Vice President **JD Vance**, when asked about it in Budapest, did not claim the story was fabricated. He said he would like to speak to everyone involved to determine exactly what happened. That is not a denial; it is political distancing.

## Not a consultation, but a lesson

It is not difficult to understand why the meeting took place. On 9 January, Pope Leo XIV, the first American to lead the Catholic Church, gave a **speech** in which he said what is almost impossible to say openly in Washington today: that diplomacy based on dialogue and consensus is being replaced by diplomacy

based on force, and that war has regained political appeal.

In the Pentagon, this was not received as a general moral admonition. It was interpreted as a direct criticism of American foreign policy and as a challenge to the logic by which power itself is considered a sufficient argument.

**The Pentagon exists to demonstrate force, capability, and willingness to impose its will when dialogue is no longer sufficient**

That is why Cardinal Pierre was invited not to the State Department, but to the Pentagon. That decision is not a procedural detail; it reveals the intention.

The State Department exists for states to communicate. The Pentagon exists to demonstrate force, capability, and willingness to impose its will when dialogue is no longer sufficient, or when it is judged in advance that it is not even necessary.

When the Pope's representative was summoned there, the message was predetermined: you do not come for a consultation; you come to receive a lesson.

## The significance of the Avignon precedent

In this context, the reference to Avignon assumes its full significance. Whoever mentioned it knew, or should have known, the weight it carried.

The Avignon papacy is not merely an episode from the Church's past for academic discussion; it is historically synonymous with the subjugation of the papacy to secular power.

From 1309 to 1376, the pope did not reside in Rome, but in **Avignon**, under the strong influence of the French crown. It was

preceded by open conflict between Pope Boniface VIII and the French King Philip IV. Boniface asserted the primacy of spiritual authority over the secular, while Philip responded with force.

**This precedent was presented to the Apostolic Nuncio in Washington not as a historical observation, but as a model for relations**

In 1303, the king's men invaded the pope's residence in Anagni, physically assaulted and humiliated him, from which he never recovered. His successor, Clement V, a Frenchman elected under strong Parisian influence, did not return to Rome.

Thus began a period in which much of Europe perceived that the pope had ceased to be the universal head of the Church and had become an instrument of a single crown.

This precedent was presented to the Apostolic Nuncio in Washington not as a historical observation, but as a model for relations. In other words, the papacy had already been brought to heel when it opposed force. Perhaps it could happen again.

## Speaking Washington's language

It is no surprise that the Vatican interpreted this as a veiled threat. In Rome, symbols are taken seriously because they are remembered for a long time. An institution that has measured time for centuries does not overlook or downplay such messages.

After that meeting, according to several sources, Pope Leo XIV abandoned his planned visit to the United States. In February, the Vatican also declined the White House's invitation for the pope to attend the commemoration of 250 years of American independence. Instead, on 4 July 2026, the pope will be in Lampedusa.

That decision carries clear political significance. Lampedusa is one of the main points of arrival for migrants to Europe and has long symbolised the failure of European policy on this issue.

The choice of that location on an American national holiday is not a matter of protocol; it is a statement about priorities and how the Vatican currently views American politics.

Even more important was what followed the January meeting. If the aim of the talks at the Pentagon was to discipline the Holy See, the result was the opposite. The Pope did not moderate his tone; he strengthened it.

**The term "off-ramp" is not standard Vatican language, but the terminology of the American security and political elite**

In early March, while American missiles struck Iran, **Leo XIV** condemned the attacks without diplomatic ambiguity and without the usual phrasing that allows everyone to interpret the message as they wish.

On Palm Sunday, he declared that God rejects the prayers of those who wage war and have blood on their hands. Then, on 31 March, in front of journalists at Castel Gandolfo, he publicly mentioned Donald Trump for the first time and expressed hope that the American president was seeking an "off-ramp" to end the war.

In an analysis published the same day, **Tomorrow's Affairs** noted that this choice of vocabulary was deliberate: the term "off-ramp" is not standard Vatican language, but the terminology of the American security and political elite – a conscious communication decision by which the Pope spoke in a way Washington could not ignore.

On Easter, before the faithful in St Peter's Square, he called on those with weapons to lay them down and those with the power to start war to choose peace – not a peace imposed by force, but one that arises from dialogue. He

did not mention any names. That was unnecessary.

A few days later, he went further, stating that the threat against the entire **people of Iran** was unacceptable. With this, he moved beyond general moral condemnation and entered direct political criticism.

## Military supremacy versus moral duty

This is where the true significance of this story lies. It is not simply another conflict between the Vatican and a Washington administration; it is a clash between two approaches to governance.

The first assumes that military supremacy grants the right to shape the political landscape according to one's own standards, and that allies, institutions, and moral authorities should conform to those standards.

The second maintains that power without limits is not order but arbitrariness, and that there are times when it is a duty to state this publicly, regardless of the consequences.

The Pentagon requested alignment in January. The Pope responded in April by challenging the very foundation of such a request.

**It is unrealistic to expect Pope's public stance to change under political pressure**

There was also a misjudgement of character. Leo XIV is not a pope from a closed institutional circle or academic isolation. He is an American priest from Chicago, formed in the Augustinian order, who spent much of his ministry in Peru, in environments marked by poverty and social instability.

The diplomatic profile he signalled at the start of his pontificate, by positioning the **Vatican** as a neutral mediator in global conflicts, far from the logic of military alliances, was clear to all

who observed the early days of his reign.

This experience means that the relationship between power and the weak is not an abstract issue for him, but something he knows from direct experience.

Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect his public stance to change under political pressure, regardless of how it is presented or from which side it comes.

## How institutions function

The political contrast within America itself is equally striking. Groups presenting themselves as defenders of Christian civilisation and as the political expression of religious conservatism found themselves in the position of sending the first American pope in history a disciplining message through the Pentagon.

An administration that frequently invokes faith and tradition responded to the Pope's anti-war messages with the language of domination. That gap is not only unpleasant; it destroys its own moral credibility.

This is not about theology, but about the way institutions function. The Pentagon makes decisions in short cycles: planning, operations, and impact assessment. The Vatican operates differently.

It does not react to pressure by changing its stance in the short term. Instead, it responds by choosing the moment and manner in which to make its position visible.



*The Pentagon attempted to remind the Vatican where hard power resides. The Vatican responded by reminding us that hard power is not the same as moral authority*

After the first hundred days of the **pontificate**, it was clear to those observing his management style that Leo XIV is a man who avoids controversy and does not wish to reduce the papacy to his own personality, but who does not deviate from the essence when it comes to peace and justice.

In this respect, this case is not a matter of a single statement or meeting, but of differences in how the two institutions understand power, time, and political responsibility.

An institution that has survived emperors, kings, empires, revolutions, dictatorships, and wars does not react impulsively. It does not change course because someone raised their voice. It remembers, records, and chooses the moment to respond so that its answer endures longer than the incident itself.

That is why the Pentagon's invocation of Avignon, if it occurred as described, was both historically ignorant and politically short-sighted. Philip IV did manage to force the papacy to retreat to Avignon.

However, that precedent strengthened neither the crown nor the church. On the contrary, it caused long-lasting institutional disruption, undermined authority, and created wounds that persisted far longer than the fleeting victory of power.

If anyone in Washington thought that was a good example for contemporary use, they did not understand the history or the nature of the institution they sought to intimidate.

The essence of the episode is straightforward. When the state feels that even the pope must be disciplined for speaking out against war, the issue is no longer with the pope; the problem lies within that country.

In January, the Pentagon attempted to remind the Vatican where hard power resides. In April, the Vatican responded by reminding us that hard power is not the same as moral authority,

nor is it equivalent to political wisdom.

This is why the incident is greater than its own drama. It demonstrates how impatient the modern American government has become with any voice that refuses to accept its military logic as natural.

It also reveals something else: in a world where more and more institutions agree to remain silent in the face of force, the Holy See clearly does not intend to be among them.