

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and Politics in the 20th Century

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 8 May 2026

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)

- Traditional approach of the Church after the French revolution: individuals and **States should follow and implement Catholic principles** to reverse the course of history and re-build peaceful communities at both national and international levels.
- The Second Vatican Council opened a new era in the history of the Catholic Church: from opposition to modernity to **reconciliation with modernity**.
- No condemnation of **modern values** (human rights, separation of Church and State), which the Church considered as positive and **consistent with the Christian message**.
- Rationale of the Council documents: Church's **disengagement from politics**.



What is a Council? Assembly of all the bishops, other members of the Church and theological experts to discuss and settle matters of Church doctrine and practice.

The Second Vatican Council - *Gaudium et spes*

Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes* (1965)

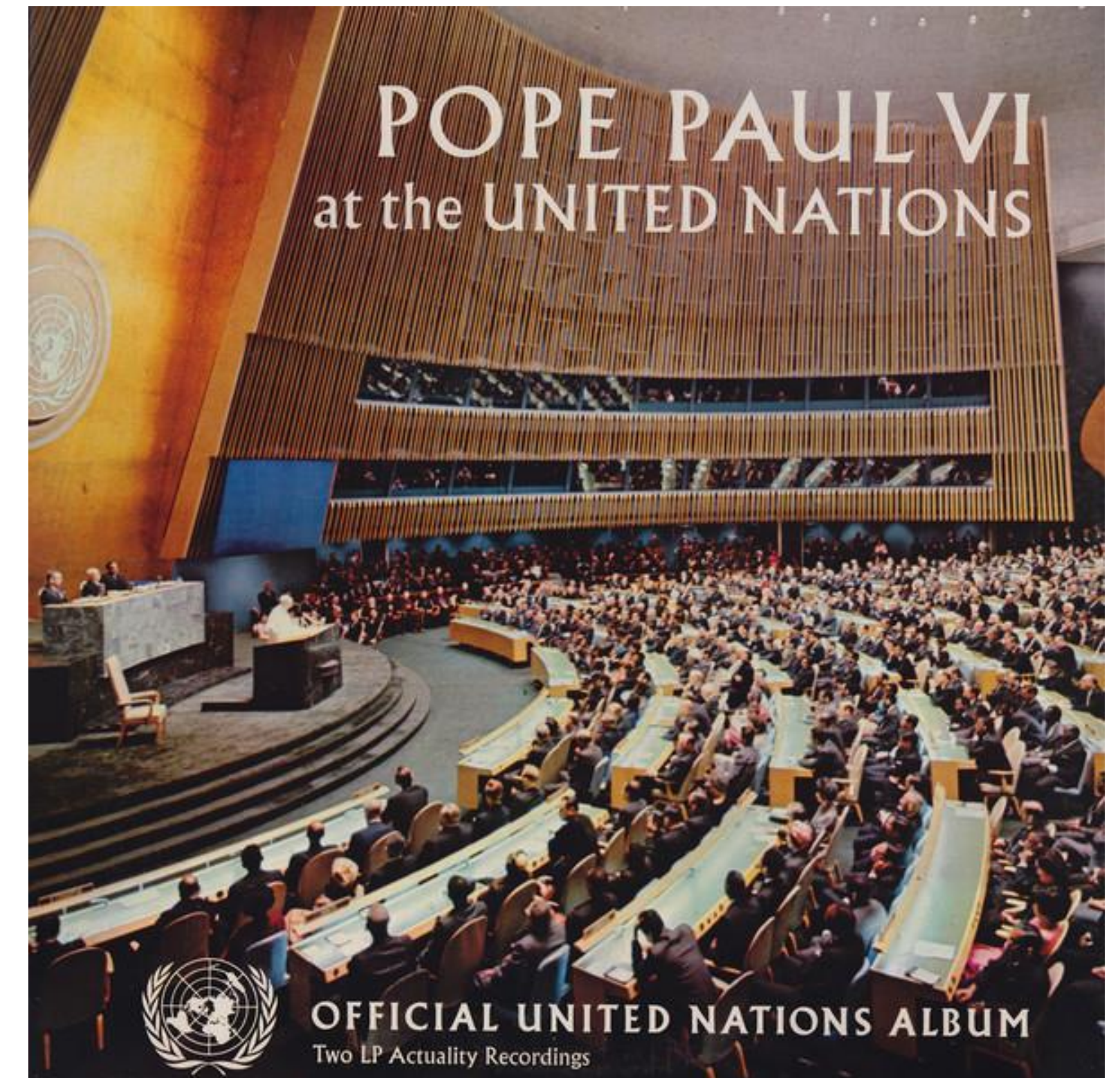
“It is very important, especially where a pluralistic society prevails, that there be a correct notion of the relationship between the political community and the Church, and a clear distinction between the tasks which Christians undertake, individually or as a group, on their own responsibility as citizens guided by the dictates of a Christian conscience, and the activities which, in union with their pastors, they carry out in the name of the Church.

The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified in any way with the political community nor bound to any political system. She is at once a sign and a safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.”

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)

The Church and the international community

- **Endorsement of the United Nations.** Pope Paul VI: “You are an association, a bridge between peoples, a network of relations between States. We are tempted to say that in a way this characteristic of yours reflects in the temporal order what our Catholic Church intends to be in the spiritual order: one and universal”.
- The Church praised the work of international organizations, in particular on three issues:
 - **Peace-making through diplomacy**
 - **Protection of human rights**
 - **International social justice**



Pope Paul VI at the UN, 4 October 1965

After the Council

- While the Church reconciled with the ‘modern world’, the ‘modern world’ was rapidly **changing**.
- 1960s in the Western world: cultural conventions were contested by a ‘**cultural revolution**’ that changed the way of life of the new generations and generations to come, both in private life (family, sexual relations) and in the public sphere (social and political engagement).
- Consequences: **criticism/contestation of authority**, which invested also the Catholic Church.



Occupation of the Cathedral, Parma (Italy), 1968

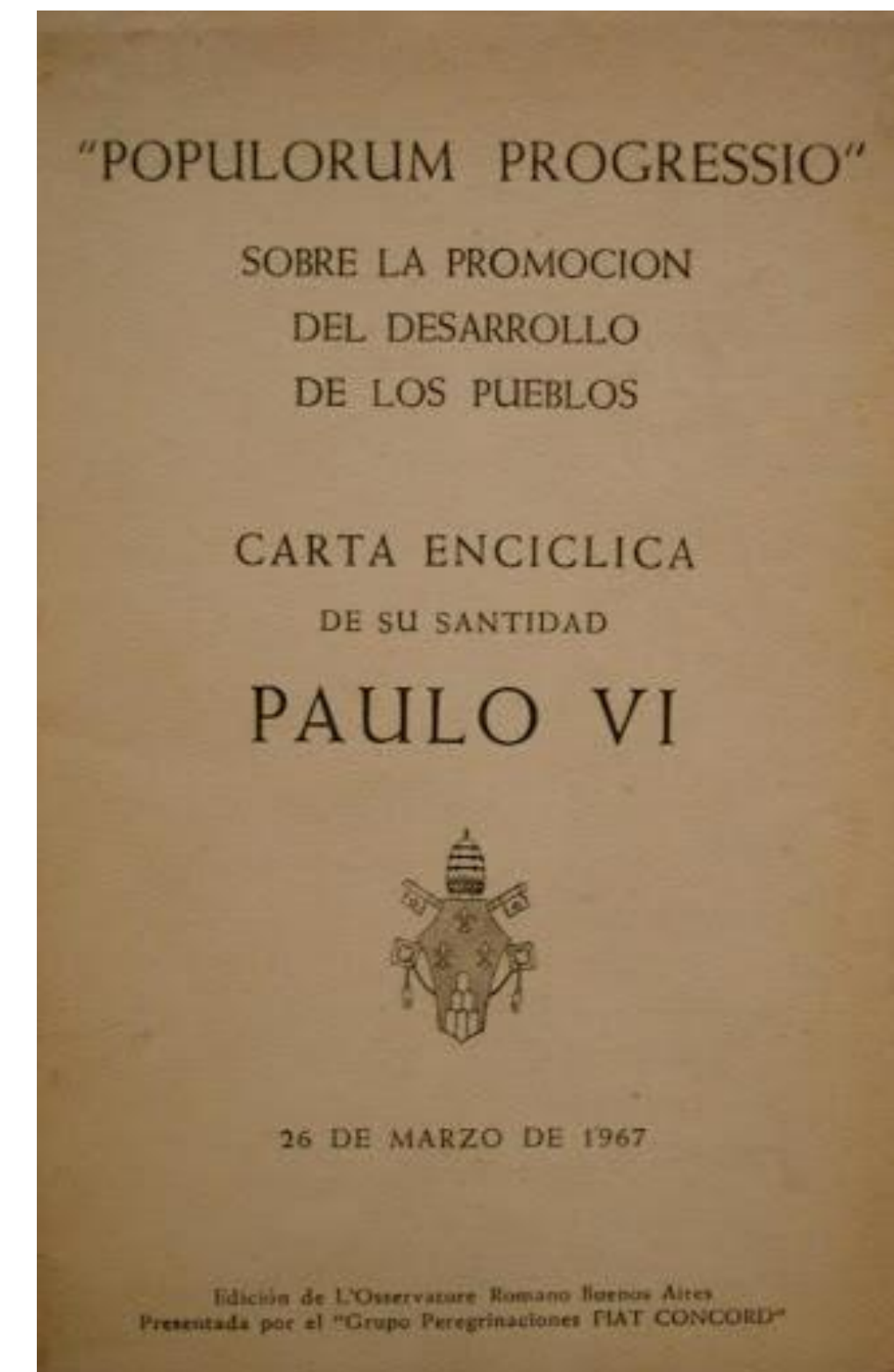
Catholicism and social justice

- ‘Liberation theology’ in Latin America: the core issue for Latin American Catholics was not the European ‘modern man’, but the ‘**poor man**’ of developing countries.
- The main focus was on **social justice**: this issue was addressed by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and by an encyclical of pope Paul VI, *Populorum progressio* (1967) .
- Context: **economic imbalances** in the international system were widely addressed in the 1960s and 1970s (example: United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 1964) .

Populorum progressio (1967)

“This unbridled liberalism paves the way for a particular type of tyranny, rightly condemned by Our predecessor Pius XI, for it results in the "international imperialism of money.”(26)

Such improper manipulations of economic forces can never be condemned enough; let it be said once again that economics is supposed to be in the service of man. (27)”



Liberation Theology/1

- In the words of liberation theologians, the **enslavement** of the the Third World was a consequence of the **interests** of the First World (developed countries, international economic powers). As a consequence, it made no sense to talk about the development of the poor countries without implementing a **structural change** of the features of the world economic system.
- Quote from Lucio Gera, Argentinian theologian: “**Dependency is revealed by underdevelopment, an inhumane condition that prevents individuals from being people, and by marginalization, an equally inhumane condition that forces both individuals and poor Nations to survive on the edge of society and international history. Beyond these symptoms, are their causes. We find them in political and economic structures, imposed by Imperialism.**” (*La iglesia frente a la situación de dependencia*, CELAM 1977)
- Influence: **Marxism** and dependency theory. **Dependency theory** argued that a structural imbalance between the rich and the poor parts of the world was caused and maintained by the ‘center’ (the rich part) over the ‘periphery’.

Liberation Theology/2

- Liberation is to be intended both as ‘**liberation from sin**’ (religious concept) and **socio-political liberation**.
- How to break away from oppression: **conflict**. Christians should not avoid conflict or revolution, since their faith demanded a fight against injustice.
- Practical consequences: Catholics were involved in **revolutionary movements** in Latin America during the 1970s, even some priests: liberation theologian Ernesto Cardenal was appointed Minister of Culture by the Sandinista government in Nicaragua after the 1979 revolution.

The Cold War - Catholicism and Communism

- Communism had been **condemned** by the *Syllabus* (1864): the most anti-Christian of doctrines, its goal being the annihilation of the Church.
- After the revolution of 1917, the Soviet Union became the first official **atheist State** in history, and implemented religious persecution in the 1930s.
- Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* (1937): «**Communism is intrinsically wrong, and no one who would save Christian civilization may collaborate with it in any undertaking whatsoever**».
- Decree against Communism (1949): Catholics who professed the Communist doctrine were to be **excommunicated** from the Christian faith.

Decree against Communism (1949)

This Sacred Supreme Congregation has been asked:

1. whether it is lawful to join Communist Parties or to favour them;
2. whether it is lawful to publish, disseminate, or read books, periodicals, newspapers or leaflets which support the teaching or action of Communists, or to write in them;
3. whether the faithful who knowingly and freely perform the acts specified in questions 1 and 2 may be admitted to the Sacraments;
4. whether the faithful who profess the materialistic and anti-Christian doctrine of the Communists, and particularly those who defend or propagate this doctrine, contract ipso facto excommunication specially reserved to the Apostolic See as apostates from the Catholic faith.

The Most Eminent and Most Reverend Fathers entrusted with the supervision of matters concerning the safeguarding of Faith and morals, having previously heard the opinion of the Reverend Lords Consultors, decreed in the plenary session held on Tuesday (instead of Wednesday), June 28, 1949, that the answers should be as follows:

To 1. in the negative: because Communism is materialistic and anti-Christian; and the leaders of the Communists, although they sometimes profess in words that they do not oppose religion, do in fact show themselves, both in their teaching and in their actions, to be the enemies of God, of the true religion and of the Church of Christ;

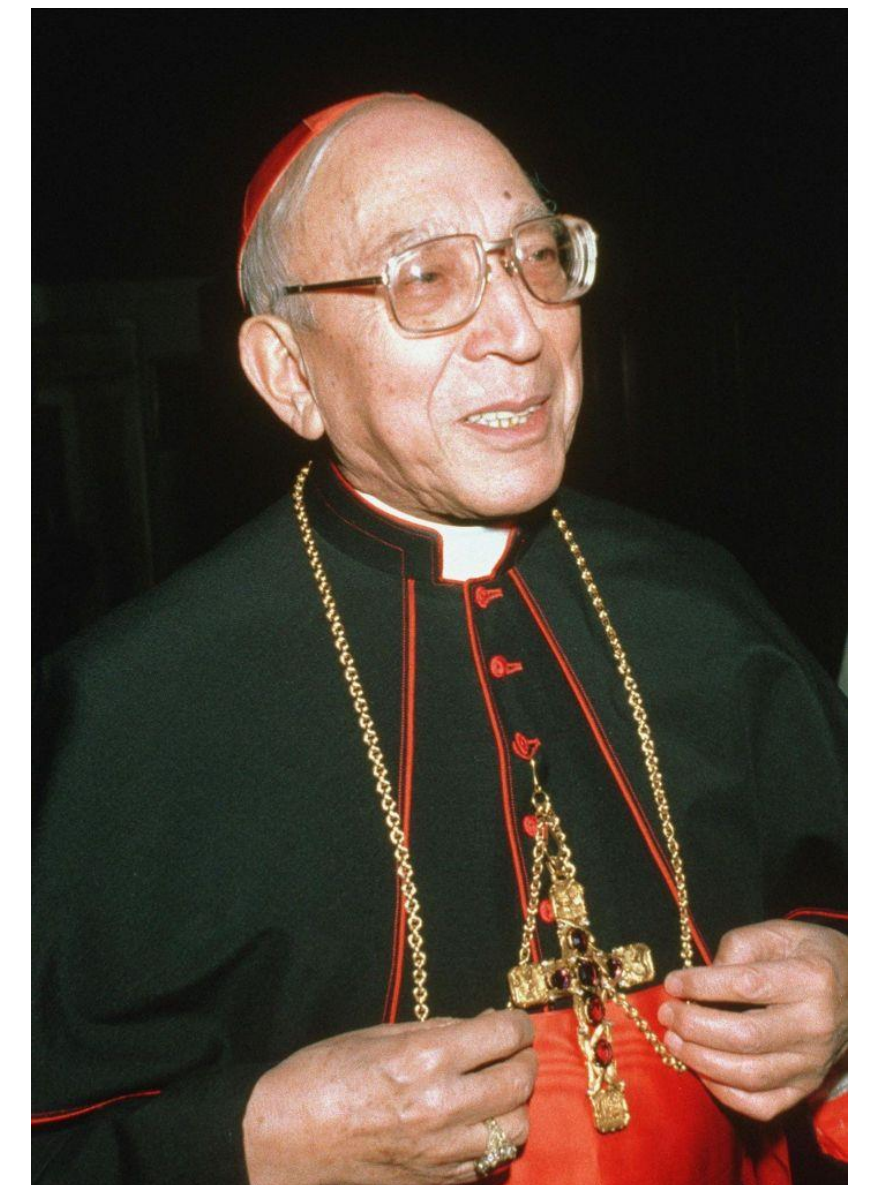
to 2. in the negative: they are prohibited ipso iure (cf. Can. 1399 of the Codex Iuris Canonici); to 3. in the negative, in accordance with the ordinary principles concerning the refusal of the Sacraments to those who are not disposed; to 4. in the affirmative.

The Cold War - the position of the Catholic Church

- Early stages of the Cold War: **religious persecution** in the Eastern bloc.
- In the immediate postwar, the Church offered its (implicit) **support to the building of the Atlantic Alliance**, notwithstanding the distance from the Western political and social model embodied by the United States, because it was a **bulwark against Communism**.
- Until the end of the 1950s the Church thought that no change was possible in the Communist bloc: **resistance through prayers and martyrdom** (Catholics under Socialist regimes were compared to the first persecuted Christians).

Vatican Ostpolitik/1

- Strategy of **Vatican diplomacy** (1960s-1970s), named after West Germany's *Ostpolitik*.
- Goals: **improving the relations** between local Roman Catholic Churches and the Socialist regimes of Eastern Europe.
- Context:
 - **détente**
 - disengagement of the Church from the alignment with the West
- Role of the Vatican diplomat **Agostino Casaroli**. Missions in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Poland, talks with representatives of Bulgaria and East Germany.



Agostino Casaroli

Vatican Ostpolitik/2

- Results: the Holy See signed two «**gentlemen's agreements**» with Hungary (1964) and Yugoslavia (1966), with which the parties recognized each other as subjects of international law, while the Socialist countries recognized the Church's authority over ecclesiastical matters.
- Participation of a delegation of the Holy See in the **Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (1972-1975)**.
- Role of the Vatican delegation in drafting the language of the paragraph on religious freedom of the **Helsinki Final Act (1975)**.

John Paul II and the end of the Cold War/1

- Karol Wojtyła was **born in Poland in 1920**; he was elected pope in 1978. Media portrayed him as an influential figure in the last stages of the Cold War.
- Clear anticommunist cultural background, but also first-hand **experience of living in a Socialist country**.
- Focus on **human rights** and religious liberty. Support to Polish trade union **Solidarność**
- Role in favoring a peaceful transition to democracy in his birth country: opposition to Communism, with a **diplomatic approach**. He was careful not to incite a revolt against political authorities in Poland.



John Paul II in Poland in 1979

John Paul II and the end of the Cold War/2

- Personal relationship with **Gorbačëv**: historic meeting in the Vatican in 1989 (see records of the meeting [here](#)).
- Goals: improvement of diplomatic relationship between the Church and the Soviet Union; focus on the protection of human rights, in particular religious liberty.
- Synergies between Gorbačëv's idea of a «**common European home**» and John Paul II's idea of a united Europe «**from the Atlantic to the Urals**».



John Paul II and Gorbačëv in the Vatican, 1 December 1989

Reading Materials

Required

Elisabeth Erin Williams (2000), *Liberation Theology and Its Role in Latin America*.
Monitor: Journal of International Studies, 7/1

Giovagnoli, Agostino (2005), *Karol Wojtyla and the end of the Cold War: Vatican Ostpolitik and Pope John Paul II*. In: Silvio Pons and Federico Romero (eds.)
Reinterpreting the End of the Cold War: Issues, Interpretations, Periodizations.
London: Frank Cass, 82-89

(uploaded on DIDA)

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