

History & Civilization - Global Governance - Tor Vergata

Religion and International Politics

Lecture 2

Jacopo Cellini (EUI), 5 May 2026

Roman Catholicism

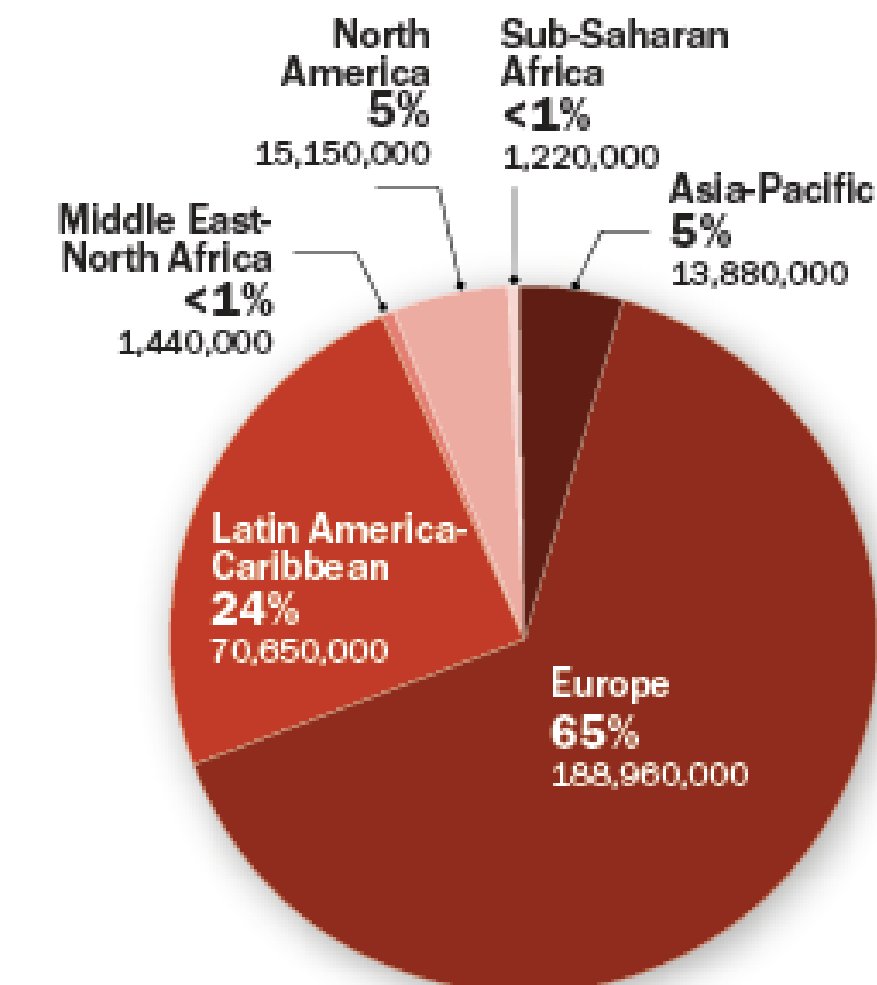
Data on [Christian denominations](#), and [Global Catholic population](#)

- Half of the world Christians are Catholic.
- Number of Christians (both Protestants and Catholics) is growing rapidly in the Global South.
- Change in the world Catholic population over a century (1910-2010): while the percentage of Catholics over the world population is roughly the same (ca 17%), geographic distribution changed drastically.
- Growth trend in the Global South; Europe is losing centrality, although it still has cultural and theological influence.

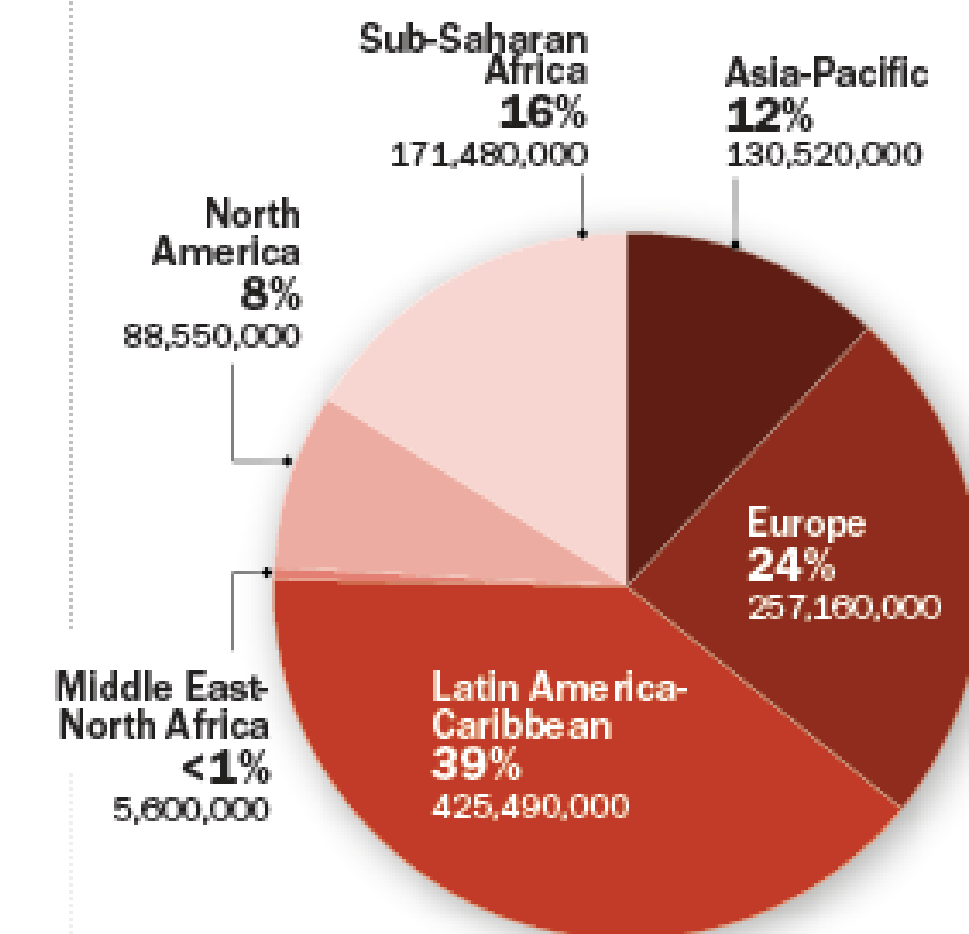
Regional Distribution of Catholics, 1910 and 2010

Percentage of all Catholics that live in each region as of ...

1910



2010



Figures for 1910 are from Pew Research Center analysis of data from the World Christian Database. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Pew Research Center

Catholicism in the world - Overview

- For centuries, there was no clear distinction between civil and religious power: **sacralization of power**. Religions are not only private affairs: they **form and sustain communal institutions**, as well as prescribing collective rituals and directives for communal behaviors.
- Religions can support and **legitimize** the authority in power, but also promote **rebellion** against what is perceived as an unjust system.
- Catholicism: from supporter of the status quo to supporter of **human rights, social justice, inter-religious dialogue, the rights of religious minorities, peace-making and democracy**. Long and contested process accelerated by the Second Vatican Council (1960s).
- Actors of **Catholic global activism**: NGOs, relief and development organisations, charities, hospitals and educational associations. Examples: Caritas International's, Catholic Relief Services, Community of Sant'Egidio.

Catholicism in the world - Regional differences/1

- Latin America: from support to authoritarian regimes to advocating for **democracy** and **social justice**.
- Sub-Saharan Africa: **peace-making** (role of Sant'Egidio Community in Mozambique 1992) and **educational and health services**.



Mural work of Archbishop Oscar Romero, El Salvador



Mozambique Peace Talks, Community of Sant'Egidio, Rome

Catholicism in the world - Regional differences/2

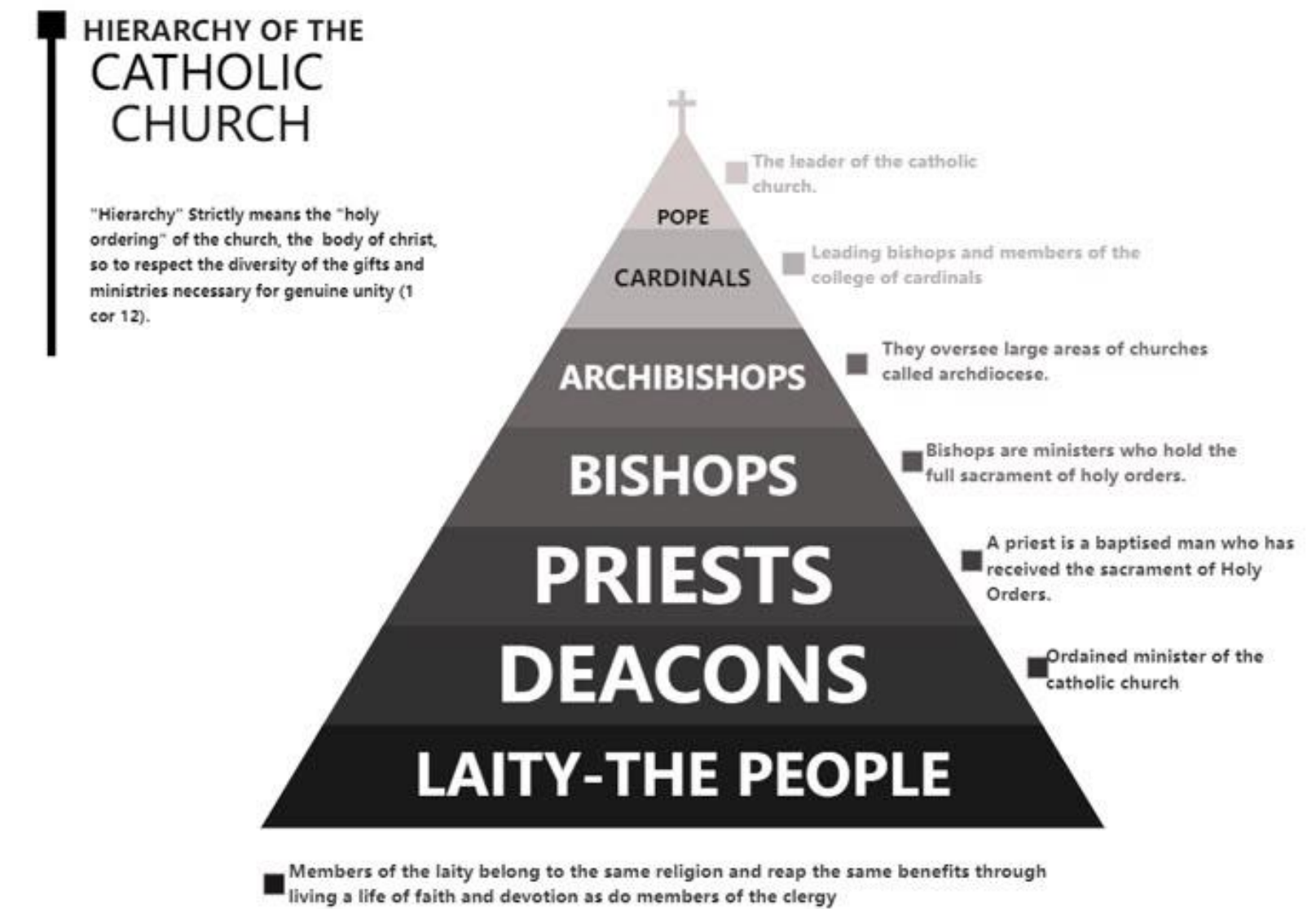
- **Ambivalence of the sacred:** religion can lead to political ambivalent behaviours. Political violence / conflict vs non-violent civic engagement / conflict resolution.
- Asia: protection of **religious liberty**.
- Western Europe and the United States: **religion vs secularization**. Catholics usually join conservatives on ethical issues (abortion, same-sex marriage), but they side with liberals on social issues (humanitarian aid, migration).



Trump and evangelical leaders, Oval Office, 5 March 2026

The Catholic Church

The Catholic Church is a **hierarchical institution**. It is the official interpreter of the Christian message, based on the sources of faith (Holy Scripture) and the Church's Magisterium (Teachings).



- Unique features among religious institutions: **State sovereignty** (Vatican State), and **diplomacy**.
- Historical background: for centuries the pope combined **spiritual and temporal authority** (he had an army and political influence).
- Popes claimed an indirect **influence over world affairs** (*potestas indirecta in temporalibus*), because Catholicism (the «true religion») provided rules not only for individual behavior but also for social life.

The Catholic Church

“For the Church teaches (she alone has been given by God the mandate and the right to teach with authority) that not only our acts as individuals but also as groups and as nations must conform to the eternal law of God. In fact, it is much more important that the acts of a nation follow God's law, since on the nation rests a much greater responsibility for the consequences of its acts than on the individual”

Pius XI, Encyclical Ubi arcano, 1922



Church diplomacy/1

- The Catholic Church is a sovereign entity under international law. It can negotiate separate agreements with States (**Concordats**): conventions that regulate the relations between the Church and the State.
- Traditional claim of the popes to act as mediators in international conflict or controversies, because of their **spiritual authority** (soft power vs. political/military power).



Pope Leo XIV meets president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, 9 July 2025

Church diplomacy/2

- **Church diplomacy in the Cold War:** role of John XXIII during the Cuban missile crisis (1962).
- **Catholic global activism** follows the Church's doctrine on human rights, social justice, inter-religious dialogue, the rights of religious minorities, peace-making and democracy.



US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Pope John XXIII and USSR leader Nikita Khrushchev

Religion and political parties

- The subject of religious parties has recently attracted the attention of the literature, mostly in consequence of the rise of **Islamic political parties** in the Middle East.
- Contrary to the predictions of **secularization theory**, religion and political parties are linked across the world (not only in liberal democratic contexts).
- Catholic parties emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century to **defend and protect the Church's interests** in secularizing societies. Their programme followed the Christian doctrine, and they needed the Church's approval.
- After the Second World War, **Christian democratic parties** played a crucial role in Western Europe and in the process of European integration (federalism, internationalism). They were inspired by religion, but formally autonomous from the Church.

Religion and political parties - Current developments

- Recent developments in Europe: **secular parties**, which do not claim to be inspired by religion, but employ explicit references to **religious symbols** and use **religious language**.
- Right-wing, populist parties use Christian cultural references as **cultural identity markers** to support political and ideological goals.
- This is an example of **politicization of religion**: religious symbols, institutions or rhetoric are employed in order to mobilize resources for certain policies or political goals.

Reading Materials

Required

Jeffrey Haynes (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*. Routledge (2nd edition) 2016.

- Chapter 3: Allen D. Hertzke, *The Catholic Church and Catholicism in global politics*

Suggested

Hellemans, Staf (2001) *From 'Catholicism Against Modernity' to the Problematic 'Modernity of Catholicism'*. In: *Ethical Perspectives*, 8/2, 117-127

(all uploaded on DIDA)

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