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The Apostolic See and the World: Challenges and risks facing global history

Invitation to debate

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With the notable exception of the history of missions, it seems that studies on the Papacy and the Holy See have not been, so far, much affected by the suggestive historiographical trends represented by world and global history. The long tradition of research based on Vatican sources has, in fact, been characterized from the beginning by its organization on a national basis: on the one hand, this has allowed the establishment of research institutes, the training of specialized researchers, funding for long-term research projects and the subsequent birth of established and prominent historiographical schools; on the other hand, it has often forced surveys within national boundaries, both as regards the subjects of study and the exploitation of sources. Moreover, the traditional assumption of periodization based on individual figures of the popes and their pontificates, choice dictated by the organization of archives, has perhaps made it difficult to reflect on other temporal breaks.

Yet, the actual presence of Christian denominations in all continents, the development of individual legal rules – canon law, moral theology, liturgy – and their global dissemination, as well as the formation of a complex hierarchical and institutional system active on a global scale make the figure of the Roman Pontiff and the Apostolic See a very interesting subject of study from a global perspective. In addition, the archives of the Holy See house a vast amount of documentation about the whole world and cover a period of over twelve centuries. Recently, moreover, the consultation of new archives and archival series has been permitted: such is the case with the Archives of the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office and the Sacred Congregation of the Index of Forbidden Books, which opened to scholars in 1998, as well as the Historical Archive of the Apostolic Penitentiary, whose modern section is accessible as from last year. Between 2003 and 2006 documentation concerning the pontificate of Pius XI – until February 1939 – was gradually made available to researchers.

The recent developments regarding the consultation of the Holy See's archives, as well as the 400th anniversary of the creation of the Vatican Secret Archives, may well represent an opportunity to open a debate on the relationship between the tradition of studies on the Apostolic See, which has been enriched – as mentioned – with new sources, and recent historiographical trends that favor a global perspective and the study of historical processes on a large scale: Can the assumption of a global perspective encourage fruitful discussions within the scientific community specialized in the Apostolic See? How can a comparative approach of world and global history be of service to studies on the Apostolic See, an institution atypical by nature and, thus, not remotely comparable to others? Is it possible to expand the field of study in terms of space and time without yielding the accuracy of archival research or the rigor of critical sources that have always characterized the study of Vatican documents? And yet, from a thematic standpoint, how can the system for transmission and management of information, the widespread dissemination of local ecclesiastical institutions, the establishment of a comprehensive network of diplomatic relations, the activities aimed at the resolution of conflicts – jurisdictional, international – typical of the history of the Apostolic See be correlated and compared with other similar historical processes? Finally, can the methodology of world and global history aid our understanding and conceptual re-elaboration of complex phenomena such as evangelization, conversion, training and dissemination of specific normative orders, and the translation of religious, legal, and moral terms and concepts?

We received a large number of contributions coming from different countries, as the different languages used in the following pages show. Some authors chose to give a comprehensive and large-scale overview of the problem using an interesting long-term approach. Other texts, focusing on a limited geographic area and specific period, offer a series of case studies that take advantage of a

global approach. Finally, other contributions aim to present to the academic community specific research projects that have been developing in recent years.

Looking at the contributions, three aspects seem to be especially interesting and fruitful. Firstly, how the global perspective can make the most of local case studies and of deep and scrupulous research on very specific periods and subjects. Secondly, the importance of archive research for the history of the Apostolic See, that can today profit from the opening of new archives, and the necessity to correlate the Roman archives with

local sources in order to avoid a Eurocentric approach. Finally, the relevance of interdisciplinary research, when applied to the study of such a special subject like the Apostolic See: the specific methodology and crucial questions of each discipline – History, History of Law, Church History – is necessary in order to achieve a more complete and deeper body of knowledge. The Max Planck Institute for European Legal History intends to develop research projects on the relationship between Rome and the World within this framework. ■