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VATICAN AND AFRICA IN THE 21st CENTURY: STRATEGY, INSTITUTIONAL PRESENCE AND PASTORAL POLICY

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Abstract. This article analyses the Holy See's relationship with Africa in the 21st century. It investigates the Vatican's institutional presence and the demographic and pastoral potential of African Catholicism. Furthermore, the study evaluates the church's peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts and the role of African clergy in the Holy See's global papal policies. The paper highlights Pope Francis' strategy and the potential for policy continuity under his successor, Leo XIV, including engagement with the African episcopate, institutional appointments, and priorities for global social justice. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates the reciprocal influence between Africa and the Vatican and underscores Africa's central role in the church's pastoral, diplomatic, and institutional activity.

Keywords: Vatican; Africa; Pope Francis; Pope Leo XIV.

ВАТИКАН И АФРИКА В XXI в.: СТРАТЕГИЯ, ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНОЕ ПРИСУТСТВИЕ И ПАСТЫРСКАЯ ПОЛИТИКА

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Аннотация. Анализируется взаимодействие Святого престола со странами Африканского континента в XXI в. Рассматриваются институциональное присутствие Ватикана, потенциал католицизма в Африке, миротворческая и гуманитарная деятельность церкви, а также роль африканского клира в глобальной политике Святого престола. Особое внимание уделяется стратегии папы Франциска и возможной преемственности политики нового понтифика Льва XIV, в том числе работе с африканским епископатом, а также институциональным назначениям и приоритетам глобальной социальной справедливости. Анализ позволяет выявить взаимовлияние Африки и Ватикана и определить значимость Африканского континента как ключевого центра пастырского, дипломатического и институционального присутствия церкви.

Ключевые слова: Ватикан; Африка; Папа Римский Франциск; Папа Римский Лев XIV.

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Introduction

Recently, Africa has assumed an increasingly significant position in the modern geopolitical landscape. Economic, demographic, and strategic factors drive this shift. Consequently, leading global actors (including the United States, the European Union, China, and Russia) have shown growing interest in the region.

Belarus likewise views Africa as a significant and promising area of international cooperation and an essential component of its multilateral foreign policy. The Belarusian Head of State has repeatedly stressed the strategic value of strengthening ties with African nations¹ in both official discourse and diplomatic practice, as evidenced by more than a dozen high-level meetings with representatives of African states in the past two years². Such sustained engagement reflects Minsk's systemic, long-term approach to the region, aimed at enhancing its geo-economic standing and affirming Africa's status as a promising partner amid changing global and regional conditions.

Within this framework, the Holy See's engagement with African states merits particular attention. Africa represents a priority for the Vatican, serving as a source of sustained growth for the Catholic faithful, clerical vocations, and institutional expansion. The constructive, multi-layered relations between Belarus and the Holy See create additional opportunities for Minsk. Belarus can use this foreign policy dimension to advance its national interests across the continent, primarily in diplomatic and humanitarian spheres.

Belarusian historiography explores the Holy See's policies and international relations through scholars such as V. A. Matskevich [1], E. S. Yarmusik [2], and D. S. Shnitkova [3]. While academically valuable, these

studies focus predominantly on Holy See – Belarus relations and do not address the Vatican's engagement with African countries.

Notable contributions within Russian academia have been made by scholars such as S. A. Gorokhov, R. V. Dmitriev, M. M. Agafoshin [4; 5], and I. A. Zakharov [6], who have contributed significantly to understanding the diplomatic, cultural, and symbolic activities of the Holy See across the African continent.

Among foreign researchers, the works of D. Philippe [7], Th. A. Sarr [8], and M. Matthew [9] stand out. They examine how the church influences African nations and the political and social processes within them.

This study aims to identify the principal priorities and characteristics of the Vatican's policy toward Africa. The research examines the institutional and symbolic presence of the Roman Catholic Church there. It evaluates pastoral, humanitarian, and peacemaking efforts. Furthermore, it considers the reciprocal impact of the African factor on Vatican ecclesiastical and governmental practices.

A comprehensive analysis of relations between the Holy See and African countries (one that captures both the nature and scale of the Vatican's influence and the continent's impact in return) requires attention to the institutional dualism of the Holy See. On the one hand, it acts as a subject of international law and a sovereign state; on the other, it functions as the global religious and spiritual centre of the Roman Catholic Church. The analysis must also account for the Vatican's peacekeeping and humanitarian missions and examine the position of the new Pontiff, Leo XIV, regarding the continent.

The Holy See in Africa: institutional and social challenges for the Catholic Church

Sustained growth in the number of believers defines African Catholicism today. In the past 125 years, the continent's Christian population has multiplied 78.5 fold³: from 9.6 mln people in 1900 to nearly 754 mln people in 2025, of whom approximately 281 mln people are Catholics⁴. This figure represents roughly 20 % of the global Catholic community. Pew Research Center projections indicate that by mid-century, one in four Christians worldwide will be African⁵.

High religious engagement marks a second important characteristic of African Catholicism. Approximately 90 % of Africans view faith as central to their social and personal identity. This figure significantly exceeds averages in other parts of the world [4, p. 104]. In countries such as Nigeria, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda, Catholic parishes often hold multiple Sunday services, with regular mass attendance reaching 70–90 %.

¹Meeting on the development of cooperation with African countries // President of the Republic of Belarus : website. URL: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/sovesanie-po-voprosam-razvitiya-sotrudnicstva-so-stranami-afriki> (date of access: 03.11.2025) (in Russ.).

²Events // Ibid. URL: <https://president.gov.by/ru/events> (date of access: 03.11.2025) (in Russ.).

³Growth of church in Africa is staggering // Living eternal now : website. URL: <https://livingeternal.net/2025/05/29/growth-of-church-in-africa-is-staggering/> (date of access: 15.08.2025).

⁴New church statistics reveal growing Catholic population, fewer pastoral workers // Vatican News : website. URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html> (date of access: 20.05.2025).

⁵Masci D. Christianity is poised to continue its shift from Europe to Africa // Pew Research Center : website. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/07/christianity-is-poised-to-continue-its-southward-march/> (date of access: 20.05.2025).

Yet despite this widespread presence, no African country has granted Catholicism the status of state religion. Consequently, the Vatican employs alternative instruments, particularly concordats. These long-term agreements regulate the entire spectrum of church-state relations. By 2025, such treaties were signed by 17 African states⁶. Concordats formalise the legal status of the Catholic Church and secure material benefits. They also cement its distinctive position within national religious systems. Analysts argue that these agreements do more than protect believers: they generate political and economic advantages in exchange for supporting state policies⁷. This creates a unique combination of spiritual influence and institutional privilege.

Although widely diffused, Christianity continues to face competition from both established traditions, such as Islam, and new religious movements, notably Pentecostalism.

Islam maintains considerable influence through historical presence and robust socio-cultural institutions. In countries with Muslim majorities, Christians often face structural inequalities in exercising religious and civil rights. Restrictions manifest directly through laws based on Islamic jurisprudence and indirectly through bureaucratic barriers and unequal access to social resources. In Morocco, for example, Christian communities remain extremely small, and proselytism carries criminal penalties⁸. Egyptian Copts, despite constitutional protections, endure lengthy bureaucratic delays when building churches, while apostasy from Islam often constitutes treason⁹. Sudanese authorities closed over two dozen churches in 2018, simultaneously tightening laws that restrict religious freedom¹⁰. Comparable pressures exist in Tunisia, Algeria, and Mauritania.

In more unstable regions, weak institutions and legal vacuums allow religion to become an instrument of armed conflict. Christian communities face targeted violence from radical Islamist groups that exploit religious identity for territorial control, social mobilisation, and legitimising extremism. Persecution thus becomes systemic, extending far beyond local disputes and generating transregional security threats.

The African Centre for Strategic Studies¹¹ reports that Islamist armed groups killed 22 307 people across the continent in 2024. Over the past decade, the death toll from such factions has exceeded 150 000, predominantly affecting Christian populations. In June 2025, extremists murdered approximately 200 Christian civilians in Benue State (Nigeria). Pope Leo XIV condemned these actions as acts of «extreme cruelty»¹². Furthermore, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, militants from the Allied Democratic Forces (an Islamic State affiliate) slaughtered over 100 believers during worship services in the Komanda and Ituri districts between June and July 2025.

Within a broader regional context, Christians remain highly vulnerable to the rise of jihadist and radical insurgencies. In Somalia, al-Shabaab systematically assassinates religious minorities and destroys religious infrastructure. Meanwhile, the standoff between the Seleka and Anti-Balaka in the Central African Republic injects a persistent sectarian and ethno-political dimension into the conflict. Similar trends appear in Nigeria, Mali, and Burkina Faso. There, regular attacks, compounded by institutional failures, fuel a protracted humanitarian crisis.

Pentecostal movements present a further contemporary challenge, expanding rapidly across Africa. The limited adaptability of dogmatic and institutional models to sociocultural realities hinders Catholicism's growth. Inculturation proves complex, and official teachings often clash with everyday practices. Dogmatic rigidity limits the integration of traditional beliefs, while positions on marriage and contraception often conflict with social practices. For example, over 40 % of Catholics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda accept contraceptive use, despite its prohibition in encyclical letter «*Humanae Vitae*»¹³. As a result, Protestant churches exhibit the highest growth rates. Pentecostals, representing less than 5 % of Africa's population in 1970, now account for roughly 12 % of population¹⁴. In countries like Mozambique, Pentecostal churches have become the second-largest Christian denomination and now far outnumber Catholics.

⁶Bilateral treaties of the Holy See // *Ius canonicum congregatio* : website. URL: https://www.iuscangreg.it/accordi_santa_sede.php?lang=EN (date of access: 12.01.2025).

⁷Quotes on concordats // *Concordat watch* : website. URL: <https://www.concordatwatch.eu/quotes-on-concordats--t38341> (date of access: 12.02.2025).

⁸2023 report on international religious freedom: Morocco // US Department of State : website. URL: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/morocco/> (date of access: 12.03.2025).

⁹Egypt country update // US Commission on international religious freedom : website. URL: <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/egypt-country-update> (date of access: 16.04.2026).

¹⁰Sudan: ongoing imprisonment and intimidation of church leaders, confiscation and destruction of church property // World Evangelical Alliance : website. URL: <https://un.worldea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/HRC39-Sudan.pdf> (date of access: 16.04.2026).

¹¹Africa surpasses 150,000 deaths linked to militant Islamist groups in past decade // Africa Center for Strategic Studies : website. URL: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-2025-mig-10-year/> (date of access: 20.10.2025).

¹²Angelus, Piazza San Pietro, Domenica, 15 June 2025 // The Holy See : website. URL: <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/it/angelus/2025/documents/20250615-angelus.html> (date of access: 13.08.2025).

¹³*Humanae Vitae* and global health // Catholics for choice : website. URL: <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/resource-library/humanae-vitae/humanae-vitae-and-global-health/> (date of access: 28.04.2025).

¹⁴Overview: Pentecostalism in Africa // Pew Research Center : website. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/10/05/overview-pentecostalism-in-africa/> (date of access: 15.05.2025).

A combination of institutional, doctrinal, and sociocultural factors drives this expansion. One of Pentecostalism's defining features is its dual character: although it retains universalist rhetoric, it increasingly acquires an ethnoconfessional dimension and functions as a means of self-identification and differentiation, first from colonial structures and then from other ethnic and religious groups [10; 11]. The idea of divine chosenness and global evangelisation combines religious mobilisation with projects of national economic and technological development.

Network flexibility and the absence of rigid hierarchies characterise the Pentecostal organisational model. This intensifies inter-church competition and allows congregations to multiply rapidly. «Megachurches» form around charismatic leaders claiming unique spiritual gifts. This phenomenon ensures internal cohesion and solidifies authority across specific social and territorial segments [9, p. 16; 12]. Media branding also matters. The active use of television, social media, and advertising turns religious communities into recognisable public actors and directly supports their growth.

A holistic worldview and the «prosperity gospel» provide the doctrinal foundation for this expansion. This theology interprets material wealth as a gift from the Holy Spirit [13, p. 52]. Amid economic instability, such teachings hold immense social relevance, as they connect religious devotion to expectations of personal and national enrichment. Emphasis on healing, prophecy, and spiritual warfare also preserves cultural continuity with traditional beliefs and increases believers' emotional involvement.

Finally, the integration of Pentecostal structures into political and economic life serves as a powerful mechanism of consolidation. Support from some governments, the participation of church representatives in public policy, and the concentration of infrastructure in more developed regions all help make Pentecostalism a marker of social mobility and a component of a new elite [13, p. 62]. Together, these factors explain its rapid institutional and demographic growth across African countries.

Any study of the Catholic Church in Africa must examine the relationship between the local episcopate and the Roman centre, together with the degree of autonomy African bishops exercise in pastoral and organisational matters. The African episcopate is expanding rapidly; by 2025, the continent hosted 771 Catholic bishops, comprising 14.2 % of the global total¹⁵. During Pope Francis' pontificate, interactions have exhibited a blend of strategic rapprochement and managed tension. Francis has notably strengthened the church's regional standing. He has fostered demographic growth, encouraged decentralisation, promoted inculturation, and engaged the youth. These efforts secured highly positive interactions with many local hierarchs. However, persistent theological and cultural differences, especially concerning moral teaching, reveal limits to the Holy See's universalist approach and highlight the growing autonomy of the African episcopate.

This tension erupted visibly following the 2023 declaration «Fiducia Supplicans», which permitted the blessing of same-sex couples under certain conditions¹⁶. The document provoked sharp criticism from a significant portion of the African clergy, who regarded it as incompatible with the cultural and moral context of the continent¹⁷. This disagreement culminated in a collective five-page statement sent to the Pope on 11 January 2024, in which the Symposium of episcopal conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) declared the norms of *Fiducia Supplicans* inapplicable on the continent. On 13 January 2024, the Pope effectively endorsed this position, stating that the document's provisions would not be implemented in Africa on grounds of cultural unacceptability¹⁸.

In several African states, the church's socio-political influence derives not only from religious authority but also from its substantial social role. By providing basic public services, including maternal and child protection and literacy programmes, church institutions command a high level of public trust. This, in turn, gives them stable channels of communication and privileged access to political and administrative elites.

The Holy See's policy in Africa: the state and diplomatic dimension

Africa holds a prominent place in the contemporary institutional dynamics of the Holy See. The Vatican maintains a permanent presence through apostolic

nunciatures in more than 40 African states¹⁹. Depending on the importance of a given country, the Vatican either establishes a full diplomatic mission locally or

¹⁵New church statistics reveal growing Catholic population, fewer pastoral workers // Vatican News : website. URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2025-03/pontifical-yearbook-2025-priests-religious-statistics.html> (date of access: 20.05.2025).

¹⁶Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* on the pastoral meaning of blessings, 18 December 2023 // Libreria Editrice Vaticana : website. URL: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dff_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html (date of access: 12.03.2025).

¹⁷*Kaihu M.* «Bad timing»: SECAM president says *Fiducia Supplicans* «damaging» to Synodal process // ACI Africa : website. URL: <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/10120/bad-timing-secam-president-says-fiducia-supplicans-damaging-to-synodal-process> (date of access: 12.03.2025).

¹⁸*Onyalla F. D. B.* «Culture does not accept it»: Pope Francis on Africa's opposition to *Fiducia Supplicans* // Ibid. URL: <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/10028/culture-does-not-accept-it-pope-francis-on-africas-opposition-to-fiducia-supplicans> (date of access: 12.03.2025).

¹⁹Apostolic nunciatures // Giga-Catholic information : website. URL: <https://gatholic.org/dioceses/nunciatures.htm> (date of access: 03.12.2025).

accredits an apostolic nuncio concurrently from another state. For example, the apostolic nuncio to Equatorial Guinea, Archbishop Jose Avelino Bettencourt, is concurrently accredited to Malabo while residing permanently in Cameroon.

Conversely, several countries (such as the Comoros and Somalia) lack any form of papal diplomatic representation. This absence results from missing formal ties, severe political instability, or stringent legal restrictions that prohibit comprehensive bilateral engagement.

African nations also maintain foreign missions to the Holy See. Just over a dozen have dedicated embassies in Rome, including Angola, Cameroon, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, and Senegal²⁰. Others accredit ambassadors based in other European capitals.

Another targeted instrument of interstate cooperation is the exchange of visits at high and highest levels. These include papal visits to Africa, visits by African leaders to the Vatican, and audiences with the pontiff or senior officials of the Secretariat of State.

During his pontificate, Pope Francis completed five apostolic visits to the continent. These tours covered ten countries across various subregions: Kenya, Uganda, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Morocco, Mozambique, Madagascar, Mauritius, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan.

Analysis of his meetings, public addresses, and official statements during these visits reveals that his engagement with the continent was systematically structured around three interconnected strategic priorities, blending pastoral mission with the Holy See's broader political agenda.

First, he prioritised promoting peace and interreligious harmony amid growing instability and radicalisation. Francis consistently rejected any equation of Islam

with violence, while also insisting on the need to protect vulnerable Christian communities in conflict zones. Second, support for the poorest and most marginalised groups reinforced Pope Francis' moral authority far beyond the Catholic faithful. Third, environmental concerns ran through his African agenda and were framed, in line with encyclical letter «Laudato Si»²¹, as a moral and social challenge. He noted that its consequences disproportionately affect African countries, despite their minimal contribution to global climate change.

These visits served as instruments of both symbolic and practical engagement, consolidating the pontiff's reputation as one of the most consistent and authoritative international voices articulating African concerns at the global level.

The institution of legation is another important element in the Holy See's external relations. It involves the pontiff sending a special representative (the Papal Legate) to a foreign country or international event for a specific and usually important occasion. The legate acts in the Pope's name within a strictly defined mandate. Such missions may be linked either to positive events, including anniversaries and major church or state ceremonies, or to crises and conflicts. For example, in October 2025, Pope Leo XIV appointed Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier as a special envoy for the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Ghanaian archdioceses²². They may equally respond to crises or conflicts.

These institutional mechanisms (visits, legations, and nunciatures) are inextricably linked to the rapid growth of the Catholic population in Africa. This trajectory compels the Holy See to treat Africa not only as a space of diplomatic presence, but also as one of the key centres of its long-term pastoral and strategic attention.

Peacekeeping and humanitarian missions as the foundation of the Holy See's activities in Africa

Peacekeeping constitutes a fundamental component of the Holy See's spiritual and diplomatic presence. It reflects the Vatican's commitment to peace, justice and humanitarian assistance.

The Pope plays the leading role in these peacemaking endeavours. His soft power allows him to influence political processes, de-escalate conflicts, and draw attention to urgent social problems. This distinct toolkit provides direct, prompt, and highly effective influence.

The next institutional tier is the Dicastery for promoting integral human development. Its operations

concentrate on justice and stability, utilising a strategy of preventive peacebuilding. The dicastery works to address the root causes of conflict (such as poverty and injustice) before violence breaks out [5, p. 75].

The Vatican also enlists lay movements in its peace mission. These operate under the auspices of the Dicastery for laity, family and life and are guided by spiritual leaders among senior Vatican officials. The most notable example is the Community of Sant'Egidio, which has worked to resolve intercommunal and political conflicts in Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mozambique, Algeria, and Togo.

²⁰All foreign embassies in Vatican // Embassy worldwide : website. URL: <https://www.123embassy.com/city.php?c=Vatican> (date of access: 01.08.2025).

²¹Laudato Si: encyclical letter on care for our common home // The Holy See : website. URL: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (date of access: 15.07.2025).

²²Letter of the Holy Father to the Special Envoy to the celebrations for the 75th anniversary of the erection of the Archdiocese of Cape Coast & Dioceses of Accra, Keta, Kumasi and Tamale, Ghana // Ibid. URL: <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2025/10/18/251018g.html> (date of access: 20.12.2025).

Pope Francis' interventions in South Sudan and the Central African Republic represent the most visible successes of papal diplomacy. In 2019, the pontiff shocked South Sudanese leaders by kneeling to kiss their feet. This gesture helped seal a peace agreement following a civil war that claimed over 400 000 lives [14, p. 41]. In 2015, at the height of the armed conflict between the Seleka and Anti-Balaka, he visited places then closed to Christians and demonstratively refused security. By meeting with both Muslim and Christian clerics, and appealing directly to residents of the Central African Republic, he facilitated crucial interfaith reconciliation and a subsequent peace accord.

The Vatican's humanitarian presence in Africa displays strong institutional continuity and a long-term orientation, setting it apart from the short-term, project-based approaches characteristic of many state and non-state donors.

Humanitarian work centres on the figure of the Pope, who acts as initiator, coordinator, and source of aid. In March 2019, for example, he donated 150 000 euro to victims of the cyclone in Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Malawi²³.

Three main bodies coordinate these initiatives: the Dicastery for evangelisation, the Dicastery for the service of charity, and the Dicastery for promoting integral human development, with emphasis on healthcare and education. In 2025, the Vatican assisted Sudanese refugees in camps in Chad and directed resources to address drought and epidemics in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

Additional funding flows from a range of foundations and other non-governmental organisations, both regionally focused and global in scope. The Solidarity Fund for the Church in Africa, for example, allocated US 2.6 mln US dollars in 2024 for 96 pastoral and humanitarian projects across 32 African countries²⁴. Since its creation, the John Paul II Fund for the Sahel has supported 3200 projects worth over 37 mln US dollars in Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, and Senegal²⁵.

Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) allocated 31.5 % of its total aid to Africa in 2022, the largest regional share in its global activity²⁶. According to ACN's 2024 report, Africa again received the largest share of the

foundation's support, accounting for around 30.2 % of all projects and allocations²⁷.

In most cases, the bulk of funds provided by Vatican-linked donors is channelled through the national branches of Caritas Africa, the regional arm of Caritas Internationalis, which consists of 46 Catholic organisations.

The Sovereign Order of Malta further strengthens Catholic institutional reach. As the world's largest charitable entity, it contributes massively to regional humanitarian efforts. It has *de jure* status as an independent subject of international law while remaining *de facto* under the control of the Roman Curia. The order runs an extensive network of diplomatic missions across the continent. It has secured bilateral agreements with several states including Liberia, Morocco, Kenya, Mali, Guinea, and the Republic of the Congo [4, p. 101]. These treaties provide a legal basis for providing medical assistance and implementing humanitarian programmes on the ground.

In healthcare, the church is the largest non-governmental provider in sub-Saharan Africa and delivers up to a quarter of all medical care. Its network includes approximately 14 000 institutions, nearly 5000 outpatient clinics, 1600 hospitals, and about 200 leprosy facilities, which together account for 36 % of the global hospital capacity of Catholic medicine [5, p. 74]. Catholic medical organisations have been instrumental in combating HIV – AIDS, Ebola, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Vatican is also highly active in education, an area of particular importance for Africa's young population. According to the Fides agency (October 2025), Catholic institutions on the continent operate over 21 000 kindergartens (serving 2.9 mln children), more than 45 000 primary schools (21 mln pupils), and 18 000 secondary schools (7 mln students)²⁸. In total, these structures encompass roughly 84 000 educational establishments reaching over 30.9 mln people and making the church the largest operator of education in the region.

Some ten Catholic universities serve the continent, training both theologians and secular professionals. These institutions attract students from various faiths and rank among the region's leaders in educational quality.

Moreover, the Holy See is committed to raising educational standards further. In June 2023, Pope

²³Rep. Dem. Congo. I primi medici specializzati del Progetto «Africae Munus» // Dicastero per il Servizio dello Sviluppo Umano Integrale : website. URL: https://www.humandevlopment.va/it/progetti/africae_munus_project.html (date of access: 18.12.2025).

²⁴Watkins D. US bishops reiterate concrete solidarity with the church in Africa // Vatican news : website. URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2025-09/usccb-bishops-solidarity-christians-africa.html> (date of access: 03.12.2025).

²⁵Meeting of the Management Board of the John Paul II Foundation for the Sahel // The Holy See : website. URL: https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/02/21/170221c.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com (date of access: 15.04.2025).

²⁶Africa listed as top beneficiary of 2022 Aid to the Church in Need donations // ACI Africa : website. URL: <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/8710/africa-listed-as-top-beneficiary-of-2022-aid-to-the-church-in-need-donations> (date of access: 03.12.2025).

²⁷Annual report – 2024 // Aid to the Church in Need : website. URL: <https://www.churchinneed.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/ACN-2024-AnnualReport-Digital.pdf> (date of access: 13.10.2025).

²⁸Vatican – Catholic Church statistics – 2025 // Agenzia fides : website. URL: <https://www.fides.org/en/stats> (date of access: 03.11.2025).

Francis endorsed the African education pact²⁹ which is an initiative to forge a common vision uniting governments, churches, foundations, and civil society around a continent-wide education strategy. The pact

focuses on long-term financing, quality improvement, and digitalisation, drawing on public and private funding as well as the potential of the African diaspora.

Africa and the Holy See: reciprocal impact on the Vatican's Church and state practices

As of May 2025, Africans held 29 seats in the College of Cardinals and came from 23 countries³⁰. Pope Francis appointed 19 of them.

The continent's growing institutional representation was also visible during the May 2025 conclave, where 19 African cardinals out of 135 held the right to vote. Several (cardinals Peter Turkson (Ghana), Fridolin Ambongo (DRC), and Ignace Bessy Dogbo (Côte d'Ivoire)) were widely regarded as credible candidates for the papal throne, underscoring Africa's rising symbolic and political weight within the Catholic Church³¹.

These gains have not, however, been matched by a comparable expansion of managerial influence. No dicastery of the Roman Curia is currently headed by an African cardinal, and the continent's share of personnel in Vatican governing structures does not, by most estimates³², exceed 5 %.

It would nonetheless be premature to treat this imbalance as fixed. Over the medium term, it may well shift not least under the influence of the soft power that African clergy increasingly exert.

An inversion of the traditional European missionary model defines the early 21st century. Dioceses increasingly deploy African clerics to Europe and the United States to alleviate local clergy shortages. This process often termed «reverse mission» is both sustained and institutionalised.

France provides the clearest example: more than 650 priests from African countries serve there, out of just over 1300 foreign clergy in total. Italy, Germany, and Spain each host between 300 and 500 African clergy. In the United States, their number is estimated at 700–800, mainly from Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya [5, p. 72].

There are also grounds to expect a further substantial increase in Africa's pastoral presence in Western countries. At a time when vocations are declining in many parts of the world, the number of seminarians in Africa continues to grow. As of 2025 data, 34 924 senior seminarians out of 106 495 seminarians (nearly one in three) are studying on the continent, with the sharpest annual increase, exceeding 2000, recorded in junior seminaries³³.

Pope Leo XIV and the African Continent: institutional and social perspectives

The current Pontiff, Leo XIV, elected in May 2025, has repeatedly declared his intention to continue the course set by Pope Francis, including a commitment to «social justice for the Global South» [15]. This may be read as a signal of sustained attention to the African Continent and the development of local church initiatives.

Before his election, Leo XIV travelled extensively throughout the region. These visits granted him a deep understanding of Africa's unique challenges. He visited the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2009, Kenya in 2011, and Nigeria no less than nine times between

2001 and 2016. A ten-day pilgrimage is planned for April 2026, with the Bishop of Rome set to visit Algeria, Cameroon, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea from 13 to 23 April³⁴. In duration, this visit matches the large-scale African journey of John Paul II in 1985, when that Pontiff undertook pastoral visits to seven countries over eleven days – a comparison that underscores its intensity and geographic scope.

Nevertheless, the new Pope confronts an array of persistent challenges. First, Africa remains underrepresented in the governing bodies of the Roman Curia.

²⁹Pope: we look at Africa with great hope // Vatican news : website. URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/ru/pope/news/2023-06/papa-my-smotrim-na-afriku-s-bolshoj-nadezhdoj.html> (date of access: 03.12.2025) (in Russ.).

³⁰Diouf A. Is the future of the Catholic Church being decided in Africa? // TV5 Monde : website. URL: <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/lavenir-de-leglise-catholique-se-joue-t-il-en-afrique-2771138> (date of access: 20.10.2025).

³¹Coulibaly L., Bruce E., Nyemba B. Africans root for first black pope in modern history // Reuters : website. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/africans-root-first-black-pope-modern-history-2025-04-22/> (date of access: 07.12.2025).

³²Chu Ilo S. Pope Leo must elevate African voices in the Roman Church // Voice Afrique : website. URL: <https://voiceafrique.org/pope-leo-must-elevate-african-voices-in-the-roman-church/> (date of access: 03.12.2025).

³³Vatican – Catholic Church statistics – 2025 // Agenzia fides : website. URL: <https://www.fides.org/en/stats> (date of access: 03.11.2025).

³⁴Pope Leo XIV to visit Africa and Europe // Vatican news : website. URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/ru/pope/news/2026-02/papa-lev-xiv-posetit-afriku-i-evropu.html> (date of access: 26.02.2026) (in Russ.).

Second, the shortage of clergy is growing³⁵: on average, one bishop in Africa serves 365 000 Catholics, far above the global average of 259 000. Third, the Catholic Church faces mounting competition from Pentecostalism, widely regarded as the fastest-growing Christian movement in Africa. Fourth, the Holy See must manage tensions with African clergy over Rome's broader recognition of LGBT rights. Finally, it must respond to demands from African actors for reparations for historical abuses, including the church's role in the transatlantic slave trade.

Concrete steps are already underway to address some of these issues. In June 2025, Leo XIV approved the appointment of five African hierarchs to the Dicastery for institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life³⁶, one of the key decision-making bodies for religious life worldwide.

The Pope has also publicly reaffirmed the region's importance as a source of growth in the Catholic flock and as a centre for forming a new generation of clergy, both strategically important for the global dynamics of the church. He has noted that Africa gives the

world hope, as well as «many young witnesses of the faith»³⁷.

An analysis of public addresses of Leo XIV also shows his systematic attention to developments in Africa and confirms that African issues rank among the priorities of his pontificate. During the first seven months of his ministry, he referred repeatedly to African affairs in official speeches and audiences. He placed particular emphasis on security and humanitarian instability in Mozambique, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Tanzania.

Simultaneously, the Holy See endeavours to repay its «moral debt», including indirectly, by promoting conditions that could improve Africa's financial position. In June 2025, the Vatican-commissioned jubilee report was published – an action plan to overcome the debt crisis and reform the global debt system, which disproportionately burdens African nations. The report advocates systemic reforms: ending net transfers from debt-laden countries, expanding debt suspension initiatives, establishing a global climate fund, and promoting South – South financial integration³⁸.

Conclusions

At the beginning of the 21st century, African Catholicism presents a dynamic picture: rapid demographic growth, high levels of religious engagement, and increasing institutional significance coexist with deep external and internal challenges. The continent has become a central hub of global Christianity, comprising roughly one-fifth of the world's Catholic population and thus commanding special attention from the Holy See. Lacking the status of state religion, the Vatican consolidates Catholicism's influence through concordats that institutionalise the church's special standing. At the same time, Catholicism contends with intense competition from Islam and Pentecostal movements, as well as systemic pressure and violence in conflict zones. A further factor is the expanding size and autonomy of the African episcopate, reflected in sharpening theological and cultural disagreements with Rome and signalling the emergence of a more polycentric model of Vatican – African church relations.

Diversified diplomatic formats characterise the Holy See's institutional presence across Africa. These range from permanent representation through apostolic nunciatures to deployment of soft power, including papal

visits and special legates. Substantively, this activity centres on the triad of peace, social justice, and ecology, enabling the Vatican to position itself as a universal moral actor on the African stage.

The Holy See's main comparative advantage, and the basis of its deep influence, lies in its exceptional humanitarian and social presence. Through its broad network of ecclesiastical structures and affiliated bodies, including Caritas, the Sovereign Order of Malta, and specialised foundations, the Vatican operates as the largest non-governmental provider of basic healthcare and education. This long-term, institutionally rooted activity builds durable social capital and confers unique legitimacy, transforming the Holy See from a purely religious institution into a significant political and humanitarian actor on the continent.

Nevertheless, despite a growing African presence in the College of Cardinals and increased electoral weight, Africa's institutional influence in key structures of the Roman Curia remains limited. Yet active «reverse mission», the rising number of African clergy and seminarians, and their role in sustaining churches in Europe and the United States are creating the

³⁵New statistics reveal the Catholic Church // Catholic news world : website. URL: <https://www.catholicnewsworld.com/2025/03/breaking-new-statistics-reveal-catholic.html> (date of access: 09.08.2025).

³⁶A new dawn: Africa's voice grows stronger in the Vatican // The African Mirror : website. URL: <https://theafricanmirror.africa/news/a-new-dawn-africas-voice-grows-stronger-in-the-vatican> (date of access: 03.12.2025).

³⁷Holy Father: hope breaks the chain of evil // Vatican news : website. URL: <https://www.vaticannews.va/ru/pope/news/2025-11/papa-nadeyatsya-znachit-svidetelstvovat.html> (date of access: 11.12.2025) (in Russ.).

³⁸A jubilee report: a blueprint for tackling the debt and development crises and creating the financial foundations for a sustainable people-centered global economy // Initiative for policy dialogue : website. URL: https://ipdcolumbia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/Jubilee-report_veryfinal.pdf (date of access: 03.12.2025).

preconditions for a gradual redistribution of the continent's symbolic, personnel, and political-institutional weight in global Catholicism.

The pontificate of Leo XIV suggests continuity in the Holy See's policy towards Africa, especially in its commitment to social justice. However, deeper engagement will depend on how effectively the Vatican addresses a complex set of institutional and sociocultural challenges, including underrepresentation in the Curia, personnel shortages, confessional rivalry, and tensions between traditional values and liberal trends.

The Vatican's response is multidimensional. It combines targeted local measures, such as appointments to dicasteries, with attempts to shape the global economic order, as seen in the jubilee report. This signals a shift away from a paternalistic model of support towards a strategy aimed at strengthening the agency of the African continent and the Catholic communities within it. Ultimately, this approach aims to consolidate the church's position in an important region.

The Holy See's engagement with African states offers a case study in building a sustainable presence with limited material resources but high institutional and symbolic legitimacy. Belarus can interpret this success not in confessional terms, but from an institutional-diplomatic perspective – as a model for combining humanitarian, educational, cultural, and political-diplomatic instruments in the pursuit of national interests.

First, Belarus could draw on the principle of long-term humanitarian and social investment, mirroring the Holy See's development of educational, medical, and charitable institutions across Africa. In the Belarusian context, this could be expressed through expanding training programmes for African specialists at Belarusian universities, transferring medical expertise, and

institutionalising cooperation in agricultural technology and engineering education. A positive image built through socially significant initiatives can provide a durable channel for political dialogue. Second, the practice of establishing bilateral framework agreements that set a cooperative foundation while allowing the gradual implementation of specific projects is instructive. For Belarus, this model minimises political risks and enables relations with African states grounded in pragmatism and non-interference, with a focus on economic and technological cooperation.

Third, the deployment of soft power through a cultural and value-based presence is crucial. By appealing to a universalist agenda (peace, social justice, and the protection of vulnerable groups) the Holy See builds platforms of trust in relations with African societies. Belarus could adapt this approach by promoting sustainable development and food security as a contribution to achieving pan-African goals, aligned with African Union initiatives.

Fourthly, Vatican practice demonstrates the effectiveness of personal diplomacy and symbolic high-level visits, which serve not only as political signals but also as institutional anchors for a country's regional presence. For Minsk, this implies intensifying contacts at the level of heads of state and government, alongside parliamentary and inter-agency diplomacy.

Drawing on the institutional flexibility, humanitarian focus, and value-oriented rhetoric that the Holy See has tested in Africa, Belarus could develop a sustainable model for its own continental presence. From a strategic perspective, this will not only diversify foreign economic relations but also strengthen Minsk's political and diplomatic standing within the emerging multipolar international order.

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