

# Intellectual Discourse

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# *Intellectual Discourse*

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# **Diplomatic Ties between Malaysia and the Holy See: A Symbol of Mutual Respect, Inter-Religious Coexistence and International Cooperation**

**Roy Anthony Rogers\***

**Abstract:** The workings within the Holy See has one of the oldest diplomatic institutions. Unlike other states with their national interests the diplomatic role of the Holy See within the international community is based on the moral authority of the Pope in favour of the wellbeing of people. Malaysia is the 179th state to have diplomatic relations with the Holy See. The relations are rather unique because no economy and consular divisions are involved. In fact, the core of the relations is based on the mutual interest of promoting justice, peace and tolerance. Although the diplomatic relations were established in 2011, this article demonstrates that there were already cordial engagements between the Popes and local leaders. This article explores the relations between Malaysia and the Holy See and analyses the reasons for Malaysia to establish relations with the Holy See and the bilateral activities.

**Keywords:** Malaysia's Foreign Policy, Holy See, Vatican Diplomacy, Inter-religious Dialogue.

**Abstrak:** Holy See merupakan salah satu institusi diplomatik yang tertua. Bukan seperti negara lain dengan kepentingan negara peranan diplomatik Holy See dalam masyarakat antarabangsa adalah berasaskan autoriti moral Paus yang mementingkan kesejahteraan manusia. Malaysia merupakan negara 179 yang menjalinkan hubungan diplomatik dengan Holy See. Hubungan yang agak unik kerana ia tiada ekonomi dan penglibatan cawangan consular. Walaupun hubungan diplomatik telah tertubuh pada 2011, artikel ini menunjukkan sudah ada penglibatan mesra antara Paus serta para pemimpin tempatan. Artikel ini

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meninjau hubungan antara Malaysia dengan Holy See serta menganalisis sebab-sebab Malaysia menjalinkan hubungan dengan Holy See serta aktiviti bilateral.

**Kata Kunci:** Dasar Luar Malaysia, Holy See, Diplomasi Vatikan, Dialog Antara agama.

## Introduction

The diplomatic service of the Holy See is one the oldest diplomatic services in the world. Early popes during the Middle Ages used to send delegates (or envoys) to represent them in the European courts. In fact, it is noteworthy to mention that the diplomatic service of the Holy See is one of the oldest ancient institutions which has survived till this day.

Currently, the Holy See has formal diplomatic relations with 183 states (Vatican, 2018). It is also a Permanent Observer State in several international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Trade Organization (WTO). In addition, the Holy See is a member in other international organisations: the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

Although the Holy See is the administrative centre of the Vatican City State and the Roman Catholic Church, its interest lies beyond creed or race. It is interesting to note the Holy See is the only state that does not have its own armed forces except a handful of Pontifical Swiss Guards whose function is to protect the Pope, yet the Holy See has been a moral authority in championing international justice, peace and harmony. The Popes have been highly concerned about international issues regardless if they involve Christians or non-Christians. For example, the Holy See has established relations with Palestine since 1948, and has supported the two-state solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Besides, in 2003 the Holy See also opposed the Gulf War.

In July 2011, Malaysia and the Holy See officially established diplomatic relations (*The Star*, 2011). Malaysia is the 179<sup>th</sup> state to have diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Besides Malaysia, a Muslim majority country, the Holy See has diplomatic relations with other



countries whose majority population is Muslim, such as Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Pakistan and Indonesia.

Similar to other states, the Holy See receives official visits from world leaders such as Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom (1951, 1961, 1965, 1980, 2000 and 2014), King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia in November 2007, President Yasser Arafat of Palestine (1982, 1988, 2001) and President Donald Trump of the United States in May 2017. Malaysia was no exception. In 2002 Mahathir Mohamad, who was then the Prime Minister of Malaysia, visited the Vatican to meet Pope John Paul II (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2002). Nine years later, the former Prime Minister, Najib Tun Razak visited the Vatican and met Pope Benedict XVI (*The Star*, 2011). It was during this visit that the official diplomatic ties between Kuala Lumpur and the Holy See were established.

Relationship between Malaysia and the Holy See can be traced back to the 20<sup>th</sup> century when His Royal Highness Sultan Abu Bakar ibni Daing Ibrahim Seri Maharaja of Johor visited the Vatican and met with Pope Leo XIII in 1885 (Candilio & Bressan, 2000). Thus, the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Malay States is not a recent development. At present, Malaysia is represented by its ambassador who is based in Rome near the Vatican, since 2013, Archbishop Joseph Marino has been appointed as the Holy See's first Nuncio (ambassador) to Malaysia (Garrison, 2013). In 2017, the Holy See opened its official chancery in Kuala Lumpur (*The Star*, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to analyse the work of the diplomatic service of the Holy See (Vatican) and the role of the Holy See's diplomatic service in promoting international peace and contributing to international diplomacy. It also discusses in particular, the Malaysia-Holy See's diplomatic relations. It is crucial to note that this article does not focus on the spiritual roles of the Holy See. Rather, it aims to examine the role of the Holy See and its contributions to international relations. The article does not include discussions nor theological arguments regarding the Holy See, but instead it discusses the Holy See's good relations with Malaysia. Hence, the article primarily deals with the issue of Holy See diplomacy within the discipline of International Relations.

This paper will answer the following questions;

- Since Roman Catholics/Christians are minorities, why does Malaysia want to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See?
- Why did Malaysia open its embassy in the Vatican City when it had the choice of the continuing its operations from Bern, Switzerland?

In order to answer the questions raised, the discussions in this article is divided into three sections. Firstly, it focuses on the background of the Vatican City State and Holy See. Secondly, it discusses the historical ties between Malaysia and Holy See prior to the official diplomatic relations in 2011. Thirdly, it highlights the contemporary relations between the two political entities. The final section provides a summary of the major findings of this paper based on the research questions stated above.

### **The Vatican City State**

The Vatican City is located on the bank of River Tiber in Rome and it is the smallest state in the world with a total area approximately 0.44 hectares or 110 acres (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). It has the smallest population in the world. In 2017, the total population of the Vatican City was estimated to be around 1000 (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). What is unique about the Vatican City is that it is ruled by the absolute authority of the Bishop of Rome – the Pope, who is also its sovereign ruler. Therefore, Vatican City is considered as an ecclesiastic monarchical state.

The Vatican City State was established in 1929 by the Treaty of Lateran which was signed between the Holy See, represented by its Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri (on behalf of Pope Pius XI) and the Italian government represented by the then Prime Minister Benito Mussolini. It is noteworthy to mention that the history of the Holy See dates back to the Middle Ages when the popes used to be the sovereign rulers of a larger territory known as the Papal State (Encyclopaedia, 2018).

The Papal State was established in 754 AD and the Pope was its sovereign ruler, a legal person within international law. Its territory included parts of the Italian peninsula (present day Lazio, Marche, Umbria, and part of Emilia-Romagna and Rome), Avignon and Comtat Venaissin, in southern France. However, in 1870 the Papal State lost

its territory in France and Italy (Encyclopaedia, 2018). The annexation of the Papal States was the result of the unification of Italy under the Kingdom of Italy led by King Victor Emanuel II (Cesare, 1909).

The conflict between the Pope in the Vatican and the Kingdom of Italy worsened to the extent of Pope Pius IX surrendering all his territories. As a sign of protest, subsequent popes refused to leave the Vatican and called themselves the “Prisoners of Rome”. Historically, the conflict was known as “Roman Question” (Kertzer, 2004). Finally, a settlement was achieved through the Treaty of Lateran in which the Kingdom of Italy agreed to recognise the Pope’s sovereignty and the independence of Vatican City. Besides, it also acknowledged the Holy See’s authority to conduct international relations. Hence, the Lateran Treaty put an end to the Roman Question once and for all. During the time between 1870 and 1929, when the Pope effectively had no recognized territory as such, he nonetheless continued to send his ambassadors to various countries and vice versa. This activity indicates that the diplomatic role of the Holy See within the international community is based on the recognised moral authority of the Pope in favour of the wellbeing of people.

The legislative body of the Vatican City is the responsibility of the Pontifical Commission for the Vatican City State (Vatican City, 2000). It consists of seven cardinals appointed by the Pope for a five-year term. The commission is headed by a president. In addition, there are other departments that deal with issues related to security, communications and health. However, issues related to foreign relations are managed by the Holy See’s Secretariat of State.

It is worth mentioning that the Vatican City State who uses the *jus officii* system for its citizenship which means citizenship is granted to those who work for the service of the Holy See (Vatican, 2018). In addition, spouse and relatives of those working for the Holy See are also granted citizenship. Therefore, the citizenship is non-permanent since the moment the individual ceases to serve the Holy See, the citizenship will be terminated. It is interesting to note that as of 2011, the number of citizens of the Holy See was 594, and they consisted of clergy, non-clergy workers and the Pontifical Swiss Guards (Vatican, 2018). As stated earlier, the Pontifical Swiss Guards are the security force of the Pope. Since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they have been in-charge of the Pope’s personal security.

## The Holy See

Fundamentally, the Holy See must not be mistaken for the Vatican City State. It predates the Vatican City State as the Holy See is the episcopal see of Rome headed by the Pope who is the Bishop of Rome as well as the leader of the Roman Catholic Church. It is also the highest governing institution of the church and a sovereign entity of international law (government of the Vatican City State).

The Holy See consists of the Pope as the ruler; the Roman Curia as the main governing institution, and the College of Cardinals that elects the Pope. As a sovereign ruler, the Pope appoints a cardinal to preside over the Holy See, known as the Cardinal Secretary of State. The post may be compared to that of a 'prime minister'. For instance, in 2013, Pope Francis appointed Cardinal Pietro Parolin to the position of the Cardinal Secretary of State.

The Roman Curia may be compared to the cabinet of a civil government as it consists of the most important administrative bodies of the Holy See such as the Secretariat of State, nine Congregations, three Tribunals, several other Pontifical Councils and Pontifical Commissions. Their history can be traced back to medieval times. For example, the Roman Rota which functions as the highest judicial body of the Holy See can be traced back to 1171 (Charles, 1913). Another interesting body of the Roman Curia is the Apostolic Signatura – the appellate court of the church which can also trace its origins to the middle Ages (13<sup>th</sup> century).

The Holy See like the other states continues to function upon the resignation or death of its ruler. When a Pope resigns or passes away, the affairs of the Holy See are temporarily administered by a cardinal known as the Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church. This period is known as *sede vacante* or vacant seat (Vatican, 2018). During this period, the Conclave will be held in the Sistine Chapel, in the Vatican, to elect a new Pope among the cardinals below the age of 80. The recent *sede vacante* period of the Holy See took place when Pope Benedict XVI resigned on 28 February 2013 until the election of Pope Francis on 13 March 2013.

The Secretariat of State is the central administrative body of the Roman Curia that is headed by the Cardinal Secretary of State (Hannah,

2018). It can be divided into two sections. The first is the Section for General Affairs which is in charge of the bureaucracy of Roman Curia such as publishing papal documents, handling appointments, and keeping the papal seal. Therefore, the Section for General Affairs shares certain responsibilities similar with the ‘keepers of the royal seal’ and ‘home affairs’. The second is the Section for Relations with States that is in-charge of the foreign relations of the Holy See. This section is headed by an Archbishop who is also the Secretary for Relations with States who is equivalent to that of ‘foreign minister’ for the Holy See. He reports directly to the Cardinal Secretary of State and is assisted by the Under-Secretary for Relations with States who can be compared to the ‘foreign minister’ of the Holy See. Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher has been holding the post of the Secretary for Relations with States since November 2014 (ABC News, 2014).

The origins of Holy See diplomacy can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Historically, as early as 453 AD, the Pope used to send Papal legates (representatives) to the emperor of Constantinople and other European kingdoms (Cardinale, 1976). By the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the title of ‘Nuncio’ (messenger) was used, instead of Papal legates. This practice continues till this day for the ambassadors of the Holy See to differentiate them from the other ambassadors, and the embassy of the Holy See has been known as the Apostolic Nunciature ever since then.

The Vatican City State and the Holy See are separate entities although they are inter-related with each other. However, they are not synonymous. According to international law, the Vatican City State and the Holy See are two separate entities. The Vatican City State is recognised as a state that possesses all legal personality in international law. It is interesting to note that the Holy See has a special status in international law because it has full legal personality even though it does not have any features of statehood. In fact, the Holy See maintains diplomatic relations with other states and is considered a member state in several international organisations, but not the Vatican City State.

### **Relations between Malaysia and the Holy See Pre-2011**

Based on available historical records, one of the earliest relations established between the Holy See and the Malay States was the visit by His Royal Highness Sultan Abu Bakar ibni Daing Ibrahim Seri Maharaja of Johor on 24 April 1885. His Royal Highness was on the

way to visit Queen Victoria when he decided to stop in Rome, and had audiences with the King of Italy and the Pope. Prior to this, Sultan Abu Bakar had visited the United Kingdom in 1866 and 1878 and met with Queen Victoria and other members of the English royalty such as Prince Edward, the Prince of Wales. This was part of the foreign policy advocated by Sultan Abu Bakar to gain international recognition for his reign (Candilio & Bressan, 2000).

In his continued efforts to gain recognition as a sovereign ruler and to establish diplomatic ties, the Sultan requested audiences with the King of Italy and the Pope. On 24 April 1885, His Royal Highness met King Umberto I, the second king of Italy at the Quirinale Palace, where dialogue was conducted with the assistance of interpreters. He subsequently requested for a Papal Audience with Pope Leo XIII at the Vatican City. Prior to the audience, Sultan Abu Bakar had asked for the assistance of Cardinal Edward H. Howard, an English clergy who was related to the Duke of Norfolk to make the necessary arrangements with the Holy See for the meeting with the Pope. On 22 April 1885, the Pope's Master of the Chamber, Mgr. Luigi Macchi was notified of the request for a Papal Audience (Candilio & Bressan, 2000).

It is important to note the Holy See was impressed with the leadership of His Royal Highness and his cordial relations towards the Catholic mission in the State of Johor. Therefore, the audience with Pope Leo XIII was fixed for 24 April 1885. The *Osservatore Romano* recorded the event as follows (Candilio & Bressan, 2000):

“Today, the Holy Father, surrounded by the members of his noble Court, received in the Throne Hall His Highness the Maharaja of Johore, independent Sovereign living in the Malacca Peninsula. His State is situated near Singapore. Together with him his brother His Highness Prince Khalid.

His Highness the Maharajah was also accompanied by the Camp Adjutant Inchi Abdullah and his Secretary Inchi Abdul Rahman and other gentlemen belonging to his suite. At the Audience also were present as interpreters three Apostolic Vicars and the Rector of the Scottish College in Rome (Mr. James Campbell).

His Holiness spent a long time in conversation with His Highness the Maharajah and expressed appreciation for the special protection he

grants to the Missionaries and Catholic subjects and for all the good actions which he practices in his State. In particular, the Pope thanked His Highness for the churches that he generously built or intends to build.

(At the end of the private meeting) His Highness the Prince, his brother and all the members of the suite were introduced to His Holiness, who had for everyone, cordial benevolent words. Once the Papal Audience was over, His Highness was accompanied with all the honours due to his high dignity.”

It is interesting to note that during the visit, the Secretary to His Royal Highness, Dato Abdul Rahman was shown a map of the Malay Peninsula which was kept at the Vatican gallery. Although the word ‘Johore’ was not highlighted on the map, the word ‘Muar’ was mentioned at bottom of the peninsula, and just above it was Malacca. According to Dato Abdul Rahman during the Papal Audience, Pope Leo XIII was well aware of Johore, although it was the first time the Pope was meeting a Ruler from the Malay States. Dato Abdul Rahman wrote (Candilio & Bressan, 2000):

“In 1885, I had the honour of accompanying the Sultan of Johore to have an Audience with the Pope at Rome, and much to our astonishment His Holiness knew about Johore, and sent someone to take us to the gallery, where there was actually a map of the Malay Peninsula, but Johore was not marked on it.”

It is equally important to note that His Royal Highness Sultan Abu Bakar was one the earliest non-Christians d monarchs from Asia to visit the Pope in Rome. For example, although King Chulalongkorn of Siam visited Pope Leo XIII on 4 July 1897, this was 12 years after Sultan Abu Bakar’s visit to Rome. However, the visit by His Royal Highness did not receive much media coverage by the Italian media as they confused Johore with Lahore (Candilio & Bressan, 2000). The relations between the state of Johor and the Holy See continued until Johor came under the British Protectorate in 1914. In fact, on one occasion, the Johor State wanted to send an officer to the Vatican City State to study Latin.

The engagement between the Holy See and Malaya continued despite the absence of official diplomatic relations. For instance, in conjunction with Malaya’s independence on 31 August 1957, His Holiness Pope

Pius XII requested Mgr. John Gordon the Charge d' Affaires of the Apostolic Delegate to Thailand, Malaya and Singapore who was based in Bangkok to send congratulatory wishes and felicitations to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and the people of Malaya. As a result, Mgr. John Gordon personally greeted and conveyed the Pope's message to His Royal Highness Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Rahman at the Istana Negara on 28 August 1957 (*Straits Times*, 1957). As a gesture of friendship and goodwill between the Federation of Malaya and the Holy See, the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman requested the national flag to fly at half-mast upon knowing the passing of Pope Pius XII on 7 November 1958 (*Berita Harian*, 1958).

Besides the relations with the leaders of Malaya, the Holy See also engaged with the ordinary people. For example, on 3 December 1953, Archbishop Martin Lucas, the Apostolic Internuncio in India who was responsible for relations with the Southeast Asia states, visited Malaya where he met with Christians and non-Christians while touring major towns like Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Muar and Georgetown (*Straits Times*, 1953).

The Holy See also encouraged local Catholics to be good citizens who would contribute to the nation-building of the country. For instance, in 1958, Pope John XXIII conferred the Papal award of Knight Grand Cross of the Order of Pope St. Sylvester to J.F. Augustin, a Malayan citizen, Headmaster and Superintendent of Education in the states of Kedah and Perlis for his outstanding contribution in the area of education. It is interesting to note that J.F. Augustin from Malaya was one of the 102 nationals selected to attend the Papal Installation of Pope Paul VI in 1963 and was conferred the Vatican's Silver Medal by Pope Paul VI (*Straits Times*, 1963). Apart from J.F. Augustin, the Holy See has conferred Papal awards such as the *Benemerenti* to local Malaysian Catholics for their outstanding contribution to the society and nation building as an encouragement.

The friendship between Malaysia and the Holy See was further strengthened with the appointment of Tan Sri Wong Pow Nee as Malaysia's first ambassador to Italy in May 1970. As the Malaysian ambassador to Italy, Wong Pow Nee was accredited to the Italian Government, but not to the Holy See. It has been a practice that no ambassador can be accredited to both the Holy See and the Republic



of Italy. However, Wong Pow Nee being a Catholic himself, played a major role in fostering ties between the two governments. For example, on 21 November 1970, Wong Pow Nee as the Malaysian ambassador had met with Pope Paul VI in the Vatican City and requested the Pope to offer prayers for Malaysia as it was then facing problems in achieving racial unity in post-1969 elections. In response, Pope Paul VI advised (Peter & Koay, 2014):

“Which country in the world has no problems? The only country that has no problems is Heaven; so as long as we are in this world, let us be prepared to face all the problems bravely and pray for guidance.”

Despite the absence of any official diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Holy See until 2011, the Holy See demonstrated goodwill and friendship to Malaysia. In November 1970, Pope Paul VI while on his way to Manila, sent an on-flight message to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong as he flew across the Malaysian air-space. A week later, Pope Paul VI made a similar gesture while he was flying from Hong Kong to Mumbai as he passed the Malaysian air-space (Peter & Koay, 2014).

However, there were domestic issues that the Holy See was concerned about especially the ones related to the Christians living in Sabah ruled by the then Chief Minister Tun Mustapha in the 1970s. In 1973, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was then the Secretary General of OIC and Ambassador Wong Pow Nee met with Pope Paul VI in Vatican City to explain the situation (Abdul Rahman, 1977). The meeting was significant in the Malaysia-Holy See ties as it was the first time a retired Prime Minister went to Vatican City to meet the Pope.

Subsequently, another significant milestone in the Malaysia-Holy See relations was the visit by Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad to the Vatican City on 7 June 2002 (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2002). Dr. Mahathir was on his seven-day working visit to Europe. Upon arriving in Vatican City, Mahathir was welcomed by an 18-man Swiss honour guards normally accorded to a statesman. During the visit, Dr. Mahathir met with Pope John Paul II, and the two leaders discussed several issues including inter-faith relations in Malaysia and dialogue between Islam and Christianity. Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir also met with the Vatican Secretary of State - Cardinal Angelo Sodano and Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican's secretary for relations with states. Dr. Mahathir

was accompanied by two other Catholic ministers, Datuk Amar Leo Moggie, Minister of Energy, Communications and Multimedia, and Bernard Dompok, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office. It was indeed a historical meeting as it was the first time a serving Prime Minister of Malaysia met with the Pope, and it paved the way for closer ties with the Holy See (*Utusan Malaysia*, 2002).

The meeting between Dr. Mahathir and Pope John Paul II was important as it was a recognition by the Holy See of Malaysia's role in the international arena. In addition, it provided Malaysia a precious opportunity to play a leading international role in promoting inter-religious and inter-civilisational dialogues in partnership with the Vatican. Pope John Paul II had been known for his commitment in linking different cultures, civilizations, and faiths. On 2 April 2005, Pope John Paul II passed away. Dr. Mahathir remembered the Pope as a man "clear in thoughts" who spoke against violence and injustice. According to Mahathir (*The Star*, 2005):

"The Pope's (John Paul II) death was a great loss not only for Roman Catholics but also for the whole world. He supported Palestine. He tried not to be biased and gave due consideration to international issues. He also did not support violence like in Iraq."

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi then the Prime Minister of Malaysia and Najib Tun Razak who was the Deputy Prime Minister also made similar remarks regarding the contributions of Pope John Paul II. According to Abdullah Ahmad Badawi (*The Star*, 2005):

"His message of religious tolerance, dialogue and reconciliation has contributed significantly in promoting better understanding between Christians and believers of other religions including Islam."

Prime Minister Najib Razak further commented:

"It is a big loss not only for Catholics but the world over because the Pope, during his lifetime, championed universal causes. He was against war and violence and believed in peaceful resolution of the Palestinian problem and war in Iraq (*The Star*, 2005)."

It is clear that despite the absence of diplomatic relations prior to 2011, this historical records suggests that there were already friendly ties and official engagements with the Holy See, as proven by the visits

of Sultan Abu Bakar Seri Maharaja and Dr. Mahathir Mohamad to the Vatican City.

### **Relations between Malaysia and the Holy See since 2011**

It is noteworthy to mention that despite having an Apostolic Delegate based in Bangkok that represented the Pope in countries like Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam Malaysia had no formal diplomatic ties with the Holy See. All the Apostolic Delegates assigned to Malaysia have been engaging with the government officials. The various engagements between Malaysia and the Holy See prior to 2011 have been crucial to set the background to foster closer ties. In fact, the Holy See had been interested to establish diplomatic relations with Malaysia since it recognises the latter as a moderate Muslim country consisting of various ethnic groups. Therefore, the move to establish diplomatic ties was not an impromptu decision, but a gradual process.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July 2011, former Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak visited Pope Benedict XVI at the Papal summer palace in Castel Gandolfo. This was another important milestone in the Malaysia-Holy See relations. Najib was the second Malaysian Prime Minister to visit the Pope. During the visit, both leaders agreed to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level on the part of Malaysia and at the level of Apostolic Nunciature on the part of the Holy See. The diplomatic relations were officially established on 27 July 2011 (Reezal, 2017).

Christians only make up nine percent of the Malaysia's population and as of 2010, there were 1,007,643 Catholics in Malaysia – approximately 3.56 percent of the total population (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). Despite the relatively small number of Christians in Malaysia, the establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Holy See was important as the two states shared a common interest in promoting international peace, harmony and moderation.

Malaysia by itself is a manifestation of harmony. The Federal Constitution defines Islam as the religion of the federation, but at the same time the rights of every citizen and community are protected by the Federal Constitution. This includes the right to profess and practise one's religion. On the other hand, the Holy See's interests are not solely confined to the Roman Catholic Church, but it is a 'voice' for moral values and peace irrespective of creed. This is best demonstrated by

the Papal's visit to Jerusalem where Pope Benedict XVI expressed his support for Palestine and even criticised Israel for erecting barriers (Butcher, 2009).

Malaysia and the Holy See are committed to reject the use of violence, extremism and war. In the words of former PM Najib when asked why Malaysia established diplomatic relations with the Holy See:

“This is the main reason why Malaysia established diplomatic relation with the Holy See. The world is at crossroads, the forces of irrationality and discord are threatening our long-cherished and hard-gained stability and prosperity. What is worse is that certain quarters use religion to justify acts of terrorism (*The Star*, 2011).”

Moreover, through its diplomatic relations with the Holy See, Malaysia hoped to forge closer links with the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue and the Pontifical Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies. This would certainly enable Malaysia to project itself as a moderate and progressive Islamic country. It is noteworthy to mention that other Islamic countries such as Turkey (1886), Pakistan (1961), Bangladesh (1973), Indonesia (1947), United Arab Emirates (2007), Kuwait (1969), Iran (1954) and Iraq (1966) had already established diplomatic relations with the Holy See. In addition, by establishing diplomatic relations with the Holy See, Malaysia demonstrated the openness of the government to the local Christians.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Holy See was welcomed by both Christians and non-Christians. Rev. Dr. Thomas Philips, the former President of Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism and Taoism stated that the ties would contribute to positive developments, particularly in inter-religious understanding (*The Star*, 2011). A similar sentiment was shared by Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, the President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST).

According to Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, the diplomatic relations between Malaysia and the Holy See should spur both Muslims and Christians in Malaysia to combat extremist attitudes and overcome religious prejudices. He also argued that at the global level, Malaysia and the Holy See should cooperate with each other to overcome the

underlying causes of various global injustices which had contributed to the current global insecurity (*The Star*, 2011).

Initially, the Malaysian ambassador to Switzerland was accredited to the Holy See as the Non-Resident Ambassador. Another milestone was created on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2012 when Malaysia's ambassador to Switzerland, Ho May Yong met with Pope Benedict XVI at Vatican City to present her credentials (Catholic Press, 2012). Ho May Yong was Malaysia's Non-Resident Ambassador to the Holy See until September 2013. Subsequently in 2014, Zulkephli Md Nor replaced her as the ambassador to Switzerland. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2014, Zulkephli Md Mor, the second Malaysian Non-Resident Ambassador to the Holy See met with Pope Francis to present his credentials at Vatican City (Catholic Press, 2012). Sadly, Zulkephli passed away in February 2016. Pope Francis during the 2017 New Year Address to the Diplomatic Corp Accredited to the Holy See expressed his heartfelt condolence (Vatican, 2017).

Meanwhile, in 2013 the Holy See appointed American Archbishop Joseph Marino, a senior diplomat of the Holy See as the first Apostolic Nuncio to Malaysia, in addition to his accreditation to East Timor and as Apostolic Delegate to Brunei Darussalam. It was also confirmed that the Holy See would establish its nunciature (embassy) in Kuala Lumpur. Archbishop Marino previously served as Nuncio in Bangladesh, and prior to that was involved in peace talks in Kosovo in 1999 (*The Star*, 2013). In 2003, he was part of the delegation sent to Washington from the Vatican to express to the US President George W. Bush the opposition of Pope John Paul II to the imminent war in Iraq. He had served in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh.

His appointment also demonstrated the seriousness of the Holy See in its relationship with Malaysia by selecting a senior diplomat as its first Nuncio. Archbishop Marino arrived in Kuala Lumpur on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April 2013, and subsequently had an audience with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah in the Istana Negara to present his credentials on May 27 (*The Star*, 2013). It was indeed a historic moment in the Malaysia-Holy See relations as he was the first Holy See Nuncio to the country.

Archbishop Marino highlighted that part of his role as the Holy See's Nuncio was to encourage inter-religious dialogue, promote peace

and cooperation among all believers. The archbishop said “It is the people who are the primary actors behind inter-religious dialogues and my role is merely to encourage it.” He added “Inter-religious dialogue has nothing to do with trying to convert each other but more of as coming together to talk about their experience of God (*The Star*, 2013).

In response to the gesture of the Holy See, in October 2015, the Malaysian government selected Tan Sri Bernard Gulik Dompok, a veteran politician as Malaysian Resident Ambassador to the Holy See. Dompok had served various key positions in the government such as former Chief Minister of Sabah, Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister. He had previously accompanied Dr. Mahathir and Najib Razak when they visited the Pope in the Vatican City.

Besides, serving as an ambassador to the Holy See, he was also accredited to Malta and Albania. On 18 March 2016, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok received his letter of appointment from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong at the Istana Negara (*The Star*, 2016). The Malaysian Embassy to the Holy See was established on March 21<sup>st</sup> 2016. Dompok arrived at the Vatican City on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 2016, and subsequently presented his credentials to Pope Francis on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2016 (*The Star*, 2016). He was the first Malaysian and 83<sup>rd</sup> resident Ambassador accredited to the Holy See. Dompok served for two years (2016-2018) in Vatican City.

Despite the short period of two years, he was able to organise significant programmes. One of them was the inauguration of the Chancery of the Malaysian embassy in Vatican City on May 9<sup>th</sup> 2017 by the former Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman. During the inauguration ceremony, Anifah Aman stated, “Malaysia strongly believes that moderation is a fundamental element for fostering greater integration and in ensuring peaceful coexistence through the rejection of extremism that undermines the universal values of religion.” (*The Star*, 2017) He also welcomed further collaborations with the various Pontifical councils. The Malaysian flag was raised at the Malaysian embassy in Rome on the Via Conciliazione, the main road leading into the Vatican. Anifah Aman also met with his counterpart, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Secretary for Relations with States and other top officials of the Holy See such as Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin to discuss regional and global issues of common interest (*The Star*, 2017).

At the same time, the Holy See, took steps to build its Nunciature Residence and Chancery in Kuala Lumpur. Since the fostering of diplomatic ties in 2011, the Holy See's Nunciature had been housed in rented property. This ended when the Nunciature in Kuala Lumpur finally owned its own permanent property with the support from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Malaysia (*The Star*, 2017). The Nunciature functions as the embassy of the Holy See. However, unlike other ordinary embassies, it does not issue visas nor does it have consulates. More significantly, it is a gesture of solid and permanent relations between the Holy See and Malaysia.

With the establishment of the nunciature, an inauguration ceremony was held on the 23rd of November 2017. It was attended by Archbishop Angelo Becciu who represented Pope Francis while the Malaysian government was represented by Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dato' Seri Reezal Merican Naina Merican. Also present were Tan Sri Bernard Dompok and Archbishop Joseph Marino, the Nuncio himself. Reezal Merican said, "Today we are very pleased to mark yet another positive achievement, with the opening of a permanent site for the Apostolic Nunciature. This lends further impetus to the effort to elevate Malaysia-Holy See relations to greater heights. Besides enabling further collective efforts at global peace building, we now have an essential platform on which to enhance other areas of bilateral cooperation such as in the education field" (Reezal, 2017).

Furthermore, during the tenure of Tan Sri Bernard Dompok in the Holy See, he participated in events organised by the Holy See as a means for Malaysia to voice its opinion on international issues. For example, Dompok participated in the International Conference on Prospects for a World Free of Nuclear & Weapon and for Complete Disarmament on the 10th of November 2017. The Conference was organised by the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development of the Holy See. The Conference enabled Malaysia to participate in the debates on the challenges of proliferation of nuclear weapons and their impact (Malaysian Embassy in Vatican City, 2017).

In addition, Tan Sri Bernard Dompok also voiced Malaysia's concern over issues related to sustainable development. For example, the palm oil industry - especially the status of the small holders in facing the challenges from the anti-palm oil movement from the European

Union (EU). On this issue, he strived to meet and discuss the matter with Cardinal Peter Turkson, the Prefect for the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development of the Holy See. During the discussion, Dompok highlighted his concerns to Cardinal Turkson (from Ghana) over the impact of the anti-palm oil campaign on the livelihood of the palm oil small holders (Bernard Gulik Dompok & Clara Soon May Lynn, personal communication, 2019). Though the Holy See was not a member of the EU, it was represented by an Apostolic Nuncio in Brussels, Belgium and thus the Holy See participated regularly in the EU conferences.

In addition, the Malaysian embassy to the Holy See received visits from several local dignitaries such as the former Speaker of the Malaysian Parliament Tan Sri Pandika Amin Haji Mulia, former Deputy Foreign Minister, Dato' Sri Reezal Merican and former Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation, Datuk Seri Panglima Wilfred Madius Tangau during their visits to Rome and Vatican City (Malaysian Embassy in Vatican City, 2017). The embassy also has organised regular events for Malaysians in Vatican City and Rome. Some of these events include the National Sports Day or *Hari Sukan Negara Malawakil Holy See*, Hari Raya Adilfitri, Deepavali, Christmas, *Pesta Kaamatan* and Kadazan cultural performance in Vatican City to promote Malaysia's multi-ethnic and religious identity (Malaysian Embassy in Vatican City, 2017).

As Malaysia's ambassador, Tan Sri Bernard also met with the Holy See's officials such as Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, and Secretary for Relations with States to discuss bilateral issues. In 2017, the Malaysian embassy in the Vatican City celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the formation of ASEAN together with the other members of ASEAN such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand that have diplomatic ties with the Holy See (Bernard Gulik Dompok & Clara Soon May Lynn, personal communication, 2019).

Malaysia also participated in several inter-religious and social engagement activities held in Vatican City such as the 'Assisi 30 (1986-2016): Thirst for Peace', visits to the Grand Mosque and Islamic Culture Centre in Rome, and feeding of the homeless in Rome (Malaysian Embassy in Vatican City & Bernard Gulik Dompok, 2018). Apart from



these, the embassy also hosted Malaysian students who were studying and conducting research in Vatican City. For example, the ambassador met with Wan Norhaziki Wan Abdul Halim who visited Vatican City for his doctoral research on comparative religion as well as the Malaysian Catholic clergies who were pursuing their studies in Rome.

It is important to note that Tan Sri Bernard Dompok also initiated discussions for the possibilities of cooperation with major Catholic education institutions based in Rome such as the Pontifical University of Urbaniana and the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), and the Missionary Brothers of Saint Gabriel (who had already contributed to the education in Malaysia with the Monfort Youth Training Centre in Malacca and Sabah, and the Monfort Boys Town in Shah Alam, Selangor) (Bernard Gulik Dompok, Clara Soon May Lynn, personal communication, 2019). In addition, the Malaysian embassy also engaged the media section of Vatican City such as e Vatican Radio - Press Office of the Holy See to explain Malaysia's position in international issues as well as provide information about Malaysia (Malaysian Embassy in Vatican City & Bernard Gulik Dompok, 2018).

Tan Sri Bernard Dompok returned to Malaysia in July 2018 and was replaced by Westmoreland Edward Palon of Sawarak. On 21 March 2019, Westmoreland received his letter of appointment as the ambassador to the Holy See from the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Al-Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin Al-Mustafa Billah Shah at the Istana Negara (*The Star*, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Upon arriving at Vatican City, Westmoreland presented his credentials to Pope Francis on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2019.

Another important milestone in the Malaysia-Holy See relations was the appointment of Archbishop Emeritus Anthony Soter Fernandez, the former Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur as Cardinal (second highest rank within the Roman Catholic hierarchy) on November 19<sup>th</sup> 2016 by Pope Francis (*The Star*, 2016). Although Cardinal Fernandez was already above 80 years old, and was no longer eligible to participate in the Papal Conclave according to Canon Law, his appointment as the first Cardinal was positively received as it was an honour for Malaysia.

The Malaysia-Holy See relations have been positive despite the instances of misgiving caused by the protest in front of the Nunciature in July 2013 due to the comments made by the Nuncio Archbishop Marino on the use of the term 'Allah' by non-Muslims (*The Star*, 2013).

However, the Nuncio subsequently met with the Foreign Minister to clarify that his comments were not intended to interfere with the internal affairs of Malaysia, and extended his apology for any misunderstanding (*The Star*, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

The Malaysia-Holy See relations is unique unlike other diplomatic relations as it does not involve economy and trade. Despite being the smallest country in the world, the Holy See has the second largest diplomatic mission besides the United States. It is also a member of several international organisations. The Holy See is neither an economic nor military power, but its strength lies in its moral force always standing for justice and peace irrespective of race and religion. Hence, statesmen visit the Pope not because of economic reasons, but rather look upon the Pope as a moral figure.

This article has highlighted that many prominent figures in Malaysian history that have visited the Pope – Sultan Abu Bakar Sri Maharaja of Johore, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. Despite being Muslims, these leaders demonstrated their willingness and openness in conducting diplomacy. For them, the Pope is not merely the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholics, but he also represents the voice for justice. The Holy See and Malaysia thus share many common interests in international relations such as achieving peace for Palestine. In addition, they were against the invasion of Iraq by the US. As demonstrated by Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and Pope John Paul II who were the two world leaders who spoke out strongly against the use of force, and were both well-known for their anti-war stance.

Malaysia and the Holy See have been concerned over the rise of extremism and radicalisation. They have been working together on inter-religious dialogue to foster greater understanding among various religions. In addition, there are other benefits from the bilateral relations such as cooperation in the area of education between local universities and Catholic institutions of higher learning. As Malaysia aspires to be a modern and progressive nation, its relations with the Holy See demonstrates the high level of tolerance and mutual respect.

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