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## **The Pope's State Address: A Message by a Head of State or a Religious Leader?**

*By Paul Hedges*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*As both a head of state and religious leader, Pope Francis combines two roles. Understanding how these interact will help us understand both his role and his State Address in Singapore more fully.*

### **COMMENTARY**

By giving a State Address in Singapore, Pope Francis may have been seen as delivering a secular speech. Before an audience of diplomats, government officials, educators, and representatives of Singapore's youth, this was a very different event from the Mass that took place the same afternoon, where the Pope presided as a Christian priest in an act of specifically Catholic devotion.

### **Hybrid Actors**

Scholars often call the Vatican a "[hybrid actor](#)" in international relations. That is to say, while it is normally assumed that the modern nation-state is a secular institution, the Vatican state, like countries such as Iran, also has a religious leadership role. Any statement by a pope may, therefore, be viewed either as the words of a religious leader, a head of state, or both concurrently.

Another feature of the hybrid actor is that they have an authority and legitimacy that exceeds their nation's territoriality. For Catholics worldwide, Francis is their religious leader, and this is more than simply about piety or moral authority. Through the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, Francis has institutional authority over the leaders and their congregations, from Cardinals through to parish priests, monastics, and the laity.

## The Pope's Tour, Soft Power, and Charisma

Joseph Nye's theory of [soft power](#), which speaks about the ways a state may influence the public of other nations by a kind of attraction, is pertinent for understanding how the Vatican acts. As opposed to hard power, typically military clout, soft power is about cultural influence, economic power, or moral suasion. In the modern world, it is primarily the last of these that is the Holy See's domain. Whereas, once, a pope could command armies, for centuries now his authority rests in his religious position.

One key of this tour – spanning Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore – and Pope Francis' whole papacy, has been a focus on interreligious dialogue. That his tour is framed between meetings in [Indonesia's largest mosque](#) in Jakarta, signing an agreement with Imam Nasaruddin Umar, and a youth interreligious dialogue in Catholic Junior College, Singapore, is no accident. The Pope was playing on his perceived role as an inspiration to coexistence.

Pope Francis' authority, like that of his predecessor, [John Paul II](#), is not only as head of state nor pontiff but as a personal [charisma](#). Sociologist Max Weber saw charisma as embedded in the authority of individuals who could inspire others. While this could become institutional in an office, Francis has inspired many by his openness and inclusiveness. While it has alienated some, including ultra-conservative Catholics who wish to [defy Francis](#), it has been an area where his [moral authority](#) has been most palpable beyond the boundaries of the Catholic Church.

## The State Address in Singapore

In the [State Address](#), the Pope sat next to Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the latter delivering an address first. This stressed their equality as heads of state and, hence, seemingly framed this as a secular occasion. But, of course, dressed in his white papal regalia, it is almost impossible to imagine the Pope as anything but the leader of the world's [1.4 billion](#) Catholics.

Tharman's speech, besides addressing Francis' particular interest in interreligious dialogue, also stressed his concern with areas such as ecology, citing his encyclical [Laudato Si'](#), alongside his interest in areas such as social cohesion and sustainability. These may seem secular concerns, but in Catholic teaching, none of them are purely secular. The Pope's Address explicitly spoke not only to the devotional needs of Catholics but also to encourage them to seek the common good for all.

For Catholics, especially Francis, [social justice](#) is a crucial area of concern. The Pope made this clear in his Address. While he began by speaking of Singapore's [technical marvels](#) and high levels of interreligious and interracial coexistence, he took aim at perceived weaknesses in the country's record. He spoke of the need for greater appreciation of [migrant workers](#), who he correctly noted were of fundamental importance to the country, and the need for them to have proper wages. The Pope's critique was more implicit than explicit, and while [Singapore's record](#) on rights for migrant workers exceeds some countries, there is room for improvement.

The Pope directly addressed two features crucial to how Singapore understands itself at the state level: pragmatism and meritocracy. Cuttingly but gently stated, the Pope

spoke of the “unintended consequences” of these policies on the most marginal and disadvantaged in society. That meritocratic principles can lead to a perpetuating ruling class is a well-known critique, so the Pope’s words were not new.

Any head of state or diplomatic visitor may speak about perceived weaknesses, or in some cases, human rights abuses, in the countries they visit. Various [international bodies](#) have criticised the situation of migrant workers in Singapore. However, with the Pope as a hybrid actor, these words seemed embedded in Catholic notions of [social justice teaching](#). He has made it clear that, in this Address, he spoke not only to Catholics but also to the broader Singapore society. As such, this was Catholic social teaching as soft power persuasion.

## Understanding the Context and Framing

Nevertheless, the Pope started and ended his State Address with warm praise for Singapore. The Pope often uses his visits to talk about problems in particular countries. For instance, in Papua New Guinea, he spoke about the need to protect children, his words having deep resonance with a scandal around a still popular Catholic bishop. Always for Francis, the poor and elderly are also of great interest. As an Argentinian, Francis is [deeply inspired](#) by the moral teachings of [Liberation Theology](#) that largely arose in South America and which emphasises God’s concern for the poor and oppressed.

Nevertheless, as a deep pastoral teacher, the Pope seeks to bring his listeners with him gently. Positive parts of his message framed the critique, so the [Straits Times](#) is not entirely wrong to headline their report on the Address with the words that Francis “commends Singapore’s inclusiveness, efforts to support the vulnerable”. In traditional Christian teaching, the Pope is a shepherd who seeks to lead and guide people, not beat them with harsh words.

Listeners in the audience and those hearing or reading the Address later on will undoubtedly have their own takeaways. But to properly grasp this event in its full meaning, the nature of the Pope as a hybrid actor whose main concerns align with Catholic social teachings, including the marginal and oppressed, as well as a focus on the [common good of all people](#), must be born in mind.

He may have spoken more as head of state or pontiff at times, but it would be wrong to separate these. His words’ impact also does not just come from his roles, as Francis’ own personal charisma reaches across religious divides, and he comes across as a genuine and compassionate man of the people. He is, perhaps, the Catholic Church’s main locus of soft power and moral authority in the world today.

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