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The Geopolitical Significance of Papal Funerals: Bridges in a Divided World

Loránd Ujházi ^{1,2} 

¹ Research Institute for Religion and Society, Eötvös József Research Centre, Ludovika University of Public Service, H-1083 Budapest, Hungary; ujhazi.lorand@uni-nke.hu

² Canon Law Institute, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, H-1088 Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

The liturgical and juridical regulation of papal funerals is coeval with the existence of the Church. The perspective that the funeral should also promote unity among Christians appeared early on. Later, it became a stage for political encounters. The Second Vatican Council's understanding of society also permeated papal funerals. The juridical and liturgical regulations were inherently built upon a philosophy of encounter and dialogue, as they conveyed the Church's social teaching and its commitment to those living on the peripheries of society, regardless of their religious affiliation. This was further supported by the homily at papal funerals, which discussed issues concerning the good of all humanity, based on the teachings of the respective Pope. The funeral rites of the post-conciliar Popes have eminently demonstrated that the burial ceremony serves as a vital bridge between different religions and countries with diverse political systems. That, contrary to Huntington's central thesis, which is based on the clash of civilizations, the starting point can be dialogue, gestures, and the promotion of peace. The study employed a qualitative methodology, processing and confronting primary and secondary sources, from which conclusions were drawn.

Keywords: papal funeral; dialogue; soft power; Holy See

1. Introduction

The legal and liturgical regulations governing papal funerals are the product of historical development (Reardon 2004). They embody the Christian faith in eternal life, the episcopal mission, and the universal pastoral and governing role of the Roman pontiff. Papal funerals also offer a glimpse into the Holy See's international relations and, more recently, its interfaith and ecumenical engagements. The modern papal funeral serves as a counterargument to Samuel Huntington's thesis of a "Clash of Civilizations," in which the cultural and religious identities of the world are seen as the sources of conflict (Huntington 1996, p. 21). After the passing of a pope, leaders of the world's major civilizations and religions gather to bid farewell to a leader who embodied their values. This gathering serves as a reminder that dialogue and coexistence between the world's various civilizations are not only possible but are already taking place.

This study begins by presenting historical examples that highlight the geopolitical significance of papal funerals. The second part focuses on the funerals of post-Vatican II popes, examining them in the context of each pontiff's foreign and security policy. The study does not aim for completeness, either in its historical scope or in its coverage of all international actors involved. Methodologically, the research relies primarily on



Academic Editors: Joanna Kulska and Anna M. Solarz

Received: 16 December 2025

Revised: 8 January 2026

Accepted: 8 January 2026

Published: 15 January 2026

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qualitative analysis, drawing on primary and secondary sources, comparing them, and formulating conclusions.

2. The Development of the Geopolitical Significance of Papal Funerals

The burial of those in ecclesiastical service has always borne distinctive characteristics (Bonomo 2021). These were expressed at times through special prayers or hymns, and in the manner in which the body was laid to rest (Muccioli 1969). Clerics were expected to imitate the peace-making Christ throughout their lives, and this expectation was reflected in their burial rites as well. From the earliest centuries, the successor of Saint Peter was regarded as the embodiment of church unity, and their funerals were likewise employed to promote that unity. A ritual of peace became part of the ceremony, calling believers to reconciliation (Willis 1994). Papal funerals from the third century onward were held in the catacombs. This expressed solidarity with the faithful and the martyrs (Maitland 1847, pp. 148–49). According to Chiara Cecalupo, in critical periods of church history—such as the Counter-Reformation or the end of the Papal States—the catacomb functioned as part of a communication strategy (Cecalupo 2025, pp. 184–85). The burial site thus became an integral part of the defensive policy that characterized the Holy See’s foreign relations prior to the Second Vatican Council. Following the council, the papal burial in the catacombs once again reinforced the image of a solidarity vision further supported by the 1965 Catacomb Pact, in which forty bishops committed themselves to a church that is poor and serves (Iheanacho 2025, p. 2). Hector Scerri emphasizes the continuity between Pope Francis and the Catacomb Pact (Scerri 2019, p. 6). Saint Peter’s Basilica likewise carried geopolitical significance (Jongkees 1960, pp. 143–55). Over time, papal funerals evolved into forums for international expression. As Geoff Berridge demonstrates, they simultaneously displayed papal authority and provided arenas for political discourse (Berridge 2007). This is illustrated by several epochal examples. The funeral of Pope Gregory the Great, for instance, was viewed by some authors as a manifestation of the *pax ecclesiae* and of the pope’s peace efforts (Richards 1980, p. 258; Markus 1997, pp. 180–83).

Over time, papal funerals came to serve less as instruments of peace and more as occasions for reinforcing political blocs, preparing wars, and deepening divisions among Christians. During the Crusades, for instance, they often provided venues for forging alliances (Housley 1992), and military campaigns were even finalized at such gatherings (Tyerman 2006). After the Reformation, papal funerals became occasions for consolidating Catholic communal unity and confronting external enemies (Jedin 1957, pp. 78–82).

3. Papal Funerals: A Journey of Dialogue and Coexistence

In the nineteenth century, the Holy See’s isolation was also reflected in papal ceremonies (Woodward 1924). Pius IX was unable to secure international support (Coppa 2014, pp. 62–70). The Holy See restricted the ceremony to a private event, thereby excluding secular dignitaries (Schlott 2008, p. 605). Although the Italian state declared its readiness to guarantee the undisturbed conduct of the funeral, the church interpreted this as an assertion of Italian supremacy (Halperin 1936, pp. 83–84). At that time, funerals were not yet a sign of reunion, but rather of separation (Swacker and Deimling 2000, p. 126). The turning point came with the papacy of Leo XIII, who placed the church at the service of social justice.¹ His foreign policy was at times contradictory (Ward 1966, pp. 47–61; Bleecker 1897; Woodward 1924, pp. 113–38), yet his pontificate marked the first steps toward genuine geopolitical engagement (Viaene 2005). The shift is reflected in the reactions to his death. Heads of state, government leaders, and monarchs alike praised the pope’s work (Ireland et al. 1903, pp. 321–22). The funeral itself symbolized that, although the pope’s temporal power had been lost (Montgomery 1903, pp. 234–40), he could emerge as a global actor dedicated

to promoting peace (La Piana 1917). Pius X further reinforced the church's commitment to social engagement (Cevetello 1953, pp. 109–10). He died of a heart attack shortly after the outbreak of World War I, and this was interpreted as the fall of the last bastion of peace. This perception shaped his funeral, where themes of poverty and international peace dominated the orations (Forbes 1953, pp. 189–90). Benedict XV's humanitarian initiatives had already earned broad international recognition (Pollard 2015, pp. 147–53). The official response of the Kingdom of Italy manifested itself in a significant yet restrained gesture: ordering national flags to half-mast on public buildings (Philpot 2014). This marked the first such instance since 1870, symbolizing the irreversible thawing of relations (Philpot 2014). These events reflected a transitional period; the state's mourning gesture signaled the improving climate that would eventually lead to the Lateran Treaty, which resolved the "Roman Question" seven years later (Philpot 2014; Muolo 2022; De Rosa 1966).

After the Second Vatican Council, the church began to use funerals deliberately as occasions to communicate its social teaching (Chamedes 2013). For states, these ceremonies functioned as channels of diplomatic messaging. After the council, perspectives from ecumenical and interfaith dialogue also became visible. The funeral of Benedict XVI, however, stood as an exception, as he was a Pope Emeritus and thus set a specific precedent for a retired pontiff. Its restraint signaled that, with his resignation, a new era in the Holy See's foreign policy had already begun. Accordingly, the Holy See extended official invitations only to the Italian and German governments (Wicks 2025).

4. The Role of Papal Funeral Rites in Fostering an Intercultural Encounter of Religions and Cultures

The documents regulating the canonical situation of the *sede vacante* and the conduct of the funeral rites primarily concern the church's internal life. Nevertheless, the principles of dialogue are also expressed in the liturgy of papal funerals (Kelleher 1998, p. 4). Paul VI did not revise the funeral rite itself but did reform the papal election (Paul VI 1975). However, he had already requested that the ceremony be kept "as simple as possible". His funeral took place on the steps of Saint Peter's Basilica, symbolizing the changed attitude. It made clear that the media function not merely as channels of news reporting but also as an instrument for dialogue and transmitting the church's messages (Młynarz 2008, pp. 51–73; Kennedy 2015, pp. 95–112). Furthermore, Paul VI, in his apostolic constitution *Romano Pontifici eligendo*, instructed the cardinal dean to notify envoys accredited to the Holy See (Paul VI 1975, p. 641).²

The liturgical order of funerals is set out in John Paul II's *Ordo Exsequiarum Romani Pontificis* (Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff 2024). The reform relegated royal symbols to the background in favor of the church's missionary vocation. The liturgy thus provided opportunities to select readings and prayers that reflected the teaching on dialogue, justice, and peace (Pasqualetti 2005, p. 59). Pope Francis further simplified the funeral order (Office for the Liturgical Celebrations of the Supreme Pontiff 2024; Gagliarducci 2025). His new provisions, among other things, allow for deviations from the general rule, stipulating that in "justified cases" the pope need not be buried in Saint Peter's Basilica. Francis himself made use of this option, choosing the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. While St. Peter's Basilica remains the center of papal liturgy, Santa Maria Maggiore holds distinct significance as a primary Marian pilgrimage site, symbolizing not papal power but personal devotion and pilgrimage (Malesevic 2023). This church, long associated with care for the poor and the promotion of peace (McDonagh 2005, pp. 676–80). It acquired special geopolitical weight because Francis frequently prayed there before and after his journeys for victims of war and for peace (Ivereigh 2019, pp. 134–40). Consequently, the liturgy of papal funerals increasingly incorporated symbols and elements

that emphasized the meeting points and shared ground of peoples and religions, rather than their differences.

Homily

The homily constitutes an integral part of the funeral Mass, which intends to offer hope and consolation (Code of Canon Law 1983, Canon 1176 §2). The pope's funeral homily holds special significance because it consolidates the common values that form the basis of the pope's social doctrine, thereby establishing a common ground. By emphasizing themes of peace, unity, and service, the funeral homilies reinforce the Holy See's soft power, presenting the Papacy not merely as a center of religious authority but as a moral compass for the assembled world leaders.

In the twentieth century, peace and justice became recurring themes in papal funeral homilies. At the funeral of Pius XII, Cardinal Tisserant emphasized the pope's efforts during World War II and his attempts to educate world leaders on the importance of reconciliation and social justice in its aftermath (Tisserant 1958, pp. 1–2). At John XXIII's funeral, the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and the church's openness to dialogue came to the forefront (Ottaviani 1963). At the funeral of Paul VI, the church's mission of peace was likewise central, which amounted to an unmistakable foreign policy statement in the midst of global tensions (L'Osservatore Romano 1978, pp. 1–3; The Washington Post 1978).

At John Paul II's funeral, Joseph Ratzinger linked the pope's opposition to Nazism and communism with his advocacy for peace and human rights (Ratzinger 2005). At the funeral of Benedict XVI, Pope Francis highlighted the philosophy of "love and justice," which may be read as a program in response to global inequality and conflict (Francis 2023). Finally, at the funeral of Pope Francis, Cardinal Giovanni Re underscored themes such as poverty, refugees, universal fraternity, the culture of encounter, and the protection of the common home (Re 2025).

The homily is not merely a liturgical element but a concentrated synthesis of the given pope's and the church's social teaching. The consistent presence of peace and social justice in these homilies demonstrates that the church delivers its message not only to the faithful but also to political and religious actors. It is clear that both the liturgy and the homily increasingly turned the papal funeral into a meeting of peoples, religions, and denominations. The following analysis demonstrates this culture of encounter by examining the participation patterns of major geopolitical actors (the United States, the Eastern Bloc, and the Global South) alongside representatives of diverse religious communities.

5. The USA's Geopolitical Position and Papal Funerals

Upon the death of Pius XII, President Eisenhower issued a statement and sent Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, along with a former ambassador, to the funeral. Yet the president regarded the funeral as a diplomatic obligation (Farrelly 2011). John XXIII sought to maintain constructive relations with President Kennedy (Bianchi 1970, pp. 30–40), who, upon the pope's death, highlighted his efforts for peace (McAndrews 2008). Kennedy sent Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson to the funeral, signaling that the Holy See had acquired both moral and geopolitical value for the United States. When Paul VI died, President Jimmy Carter issued a statement emphasizing peace and interdenominational humanitarian cooperation (Presidency of the United States 1978). The presence of the First Lady at the funeral was a diplomatic precedent, consistent with Carter's policy of moral diplomacy (Brinkley 1995, pp. 92, 94; Keys 2016, pp. 230–31). It conveyed that the United States regarded the Holy See as an ally (Wanner 2020, pp. 171–72, 179–81). At the funeral of John Paul I, following his brief pontificate, the president's mother, Lillian Carter, represented the nation (The Crimson 1978). As an apolitical figure, she embodied

humanitarian commitment and the spirit of dialogue (Willard 2011, pp. 249–50). The United States played a central role in John Paul II's spiritually grounded diplomacy (Stummvoll 2018, pp. 121–22). Diplomatic relations were elevated to the highest level, and for the first time, an American president attended a papal funeral (Weigel 2010). Moreover, the bipartisan delegation—composed of George W. Bush, George H. W. Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Bill Clinton—demonstrated that leaders across the political spectrum acknowledged the pope's global moral authority (Clafin 2024).

From an American perspective, the funeral of Pope Francis also reflected bipartisanship. Both Donald Trump and Joe Biden were present—the latter having awarded the pope the Presidential Medal of Freedom (Vatican News 2025). The event acquired particular geopolitical weight through the meeting between Trump and Volodymyr Zelensky, which the Holy See deliberately used to promote peace in Ukraine (Németh 2023).

6. Eastern Bloc Countries in the Context of Papal Funerals

Due to Pius XII's Western orientation, the Soviet Union exploited his funeral as an opportunity to criticize the Holy See (Riccardi 2008, p. 345). Yet, as John Pollard notes, it was significant that Polish, Lithuanian, and Hungarian émigrés took part in the ceremony. Their presence symbolized the unofficial bridge between Eastern Europe and the Holy See (Pollard 2014, p. 112). John XXIII initiated negotiations with the +Eastern Bloc (Hehir 1990, pp. 29–30). Khrushchev praised the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and the Vatican's positions on peaceful coexistence (Hehir 1990, pp. 29–30). The Eastern Bloc signaled its interest in continuing this policy through active participation in the funeral (Vardey 2014, p. 120). Paul VI developed a genuine *Ostpolitik* (Kramer 1980, pp. 283–308). Upon his death, questions arose once again about whether this pragmatic dialogue continued, lending additional weight to his funeral (The Washington Post 1978). Eastern Bloc countries aligned themselves with the Soviet Union through their presence and sent a series of condolence messages portraying the pope as a man of peace and dialogue (Fejérdy 2015). These gestures reflected not only the Holy See's influence but also the possibility of dialogue (Claiborne 1978). John Paul II pursued a foreign policy based on moral principles, but Eastern Europe was particularly important to him. At his funeral, former socialist countries participated, some already as members of the EU and NATO. The Russian delegation was headed by Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov, which amounted to high-level representation. Leaders of other geopolitically significant states were also present, including Ukraine, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova. Their presence simultaneously signified recognition of the pope's historical role in the promotion of peace and human rights.

7. International Organizations and Their Significance for Papal Funerals

Papal funerals also reflect the Holy See's multilateral embeddedness. After World War I, the Holy See maintained an ambivalent attitude toward international organizations (Lucien-Brun 1964, p. 538), which was evident in the brief condolence telegrams sent to Pius XI's funeral (Information Section of the League of Nations 1939, p. 2).

Pius XII likewise remained skeptical of such bodies (Lucal 1970, p. 317). Yet, it became increasingly difficult to ignore that their efforts in the realm of peace resonated with Catholic social teaching (Tittmann 2004). At the funeral of Pius XII, representatives of the United Nations, the Food and Agriculture Organization, Euratom, the EEC, and the European Coal and Steel Community were already present, an indication of a developing dialogue on shared values (Schlott 2008, p. 606). John XXIII already regarded international organizations as potential allies in the pursuit of global peace (John XXIII 1962). For these organizations, however, the Holy See's capacities in interfaith and interdenominational dialogue, humanitarian interventions, and the struggle against poverty also acquired

significant value (Nouailhat 2006, pp. 95–110). Federico Alessandrini characterizes John XXIII's funeral as a universal message of peace—a judgment confirmed by the presence of representatives of international organizations at the ceremony (Alessandrini 1964, p. 206).

Paul VI was the first pope to address the UN General Assembly in person, describing the organization as a “school” that educates humanity on the path to peace (Paul VI 1965a, pp. 878–85). He also paid visits to other international organizations. At his funeral, representatives of such bodies participated in significant numbers. Underscoring both the church's multilateral role and the diplomatic weight of the Holy See. John Paul II at times voiced criticism of international organizations (John Paul II 1988, pp. 525–26; John Paul II 1991, pp. 818–19). Nevertheless, during his pontificate, the system of multilateral relations was significantly strengthened (Weigel 2010; Melnyk 2009). At his funeral, international organizations were represented in both unprecedented numbers and at a remarkably high level (including the UN, the European Union, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, NATO, the African Union, etc.). This broad representation reflected the growing weight of the Holy See's multilateral relations (Clafflin 2024).

Pope Francis's foreign policy was likewise shaped by dialogue in the service of peace, with international organizations providing key forums. Contemporary security threats—ranging from wars to emerging challenges such as climate change, migration, and nuclear disarmament—raised questions about the effectiveness of these organizations (Francis 2015, pp. 914–15; Francis 2020, pp. 885–1039; Ball 2016, pp. 33–36; Christiansen 2017). The presence and statements of representatives of international organizations testified to his commitment to universal peace (Auza 2016, pp. 16–22). This perspective was well captured by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who emphasized that Francis was “an advocate for peace, human dignity, and social justice” (Guterres 2025). This recognition applied not only to Francis, but also to shared values. The message conveyed by these acts of participation and testimony was clear: global problems can only be addressed through broad cooperation—and in this effort, the church has a vital role and tangible capabilities in crisis management.

8. Papal Funerals as Cultural Bridge of the Global South

Countries of the Global South are linked by a shared colonial past, marginal geopolitical roles, and underrepresentation in international organizations (Trefzer et al. 2014, pp. 1–14; Dirlík 2007, pp. 12–23). For these states, papal funerals serve as important platforms for enhancing their international visibility (Coppa 2006, p. 600). Paul VI personally carried the church's social teaching to South America and Africa, where several states had already come to regard the Holy See as a geopolitical ally.³ The presence of African leaders, such as Zambian President Kenneth Kaunda, at the pope's funeral underscored this perception. Zambia was a frontline state in the fight against apartheid regimes, and Paul VI had supported African nations in their human rights struggles (Neve 1976). Kaunda's participation signaled that, in such struggles, the Apostolic See stood with them as a source of moral authority. The funeral also reflected the moral standpoint of the Holy See within South American countries (Daudelin 1995, pp. 221–36). For instance, General Jorge Rafael Videla sought legitimacy and used the occasion for informal meetings (Osiel 2001), while the Pinochet regime in Chile employed it to signal resistance. In Chile's case, following the suspension of political parties, the church remained the sole forum opposing state violations of law. The presence of the foreign minister and the absence of the president reflected this ongoing tension (Aguila 2003).

The Global South played a significant role in John Paul II's foreign policy. He drew attention to interfaith dialogue and social injustices, asked forgiveness for slavery, and convened the first African Synod (John Paul II 1981, p. 646). He also appointed African

bishops to positions within the Holy See. These gestures were warmly welcomed by African countries (Iheanacho 2021). At his funeral, the fruits of this engagement were visible in the presence of leaders (Holm 2005; Palard 2020, p. 9; Isumonah 2012; Obasanjo 2015, p. 11; Schubert 2010; Villalón 2004, p. 64; Letsie 2015; Bongmba 2004). Human rights issues held particular significance for countries such as South Africa, which was represented at the funeral by President Thabo Mbeki, Nelson Mandela's successor. Both Mandela and Mbeki had benefited from John Paul II's support in their struggle against the apartheid regime (Bongmba 2004). Mbeki's presence expressed a shared commitment to human rights (Adelmann 2004). In other cases, participation served as a human rights cry for help. Joseph Kabila, interim president of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Reyntjens 2001), used the occasion at a fragile moment of governance to signal reliance on the Catholic Church (Boyle 1995). Others attended in order to bolster their legitimacy. Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Omar al-Bashir of Sudan, both condemned for human rights violations, exploited the opportunity to appear among world leaders. This, in turn, created difficulties for the church in determining where and how to draw the line regarding state delegation participation (Howard-Hassmann 2010; Mills 2012; Straus 2005).

By the time of John Paul II's funeral, the situation in South America had changed significantly compared with that of Paul VI. Democratically elected delegations, grounded in diplomatic reciprocity and respect for human rights, had become the norm. Nevertheless, the church's complex relationship with both the political left and the right persisted. Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva offered a telling example: as a leftist politician, he represented the world's largest Catholic nation, thereby expressing common values between the democratic left and the church (Love 1999, p. 7). The funeral provided a special occasion to illustrate what W. Hewitt described as not a political bargain but an organic cooperation between the church and the political left in Brazil (Hewitt 1992). The high-level Chilean delegation, which remembered the Holy See's support even during the years of dictatorship, symbolized the same point (Zoellner 2006, p. 8). At the same time, the funeral also exposed underlying disagreements. In Argentina, President Néstor Kirchner opposed the legacy of dictatorship yet clashed with the local church on numerous issues (Souroujon 2017). At the funeral, only the vice president and representatives of the Ministry of Religious Affairs participated—an implicit message that their difficulties lay not with the Holy See but with the local church.

During the papacy of Pope Francis, geopolitical themes central to the Global South came to the forefront (Giovagnoli 2019). In many of these countries, the church, through its institutions, functions as a "substitute state", a reality that governments cannot ignore. This dynamic was clearly illustrated by the number and stature of delegations from the region. The funeral could almost be described as a "summit meeting" of the Global South, exemplified by countries such as Angola, where the church operates thousands of educational and social institutions. Despite Angola's oil wealth, President João Lourenço sought to address persistent poverty in cooperation with the church (Ngudiankama 2025; García-Rodríguez et al. 2015).

The high-level representation at the funeral served as a visible expression of this collaboration. The presence of Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, for instance, was significant (Bagayoko 2018, pp. 41, 48; Catholic News Agency 2025). He represented a state that Pope Francis had visited in 2015 despite conditions of civil war, during which the pope called for interfaith dialogue and reconciliation (Kłosowicz 2016; Vlavonou 2016). Nigeria offered a different perspective with its delegation led by Senate President Godswill Akpabio. The church plays an important social role there, but the country is also the homeland of countless Christian martyrs (Zegarini 2023). The participation of Nigerian leaders drew global attention to the state's obligations in con-

fronting anti-Christian sentiment (Carletti 2015). South America, the pope's native region, was central to his efforts to communicate the church's teaching through the framing of key social issues. This did not mean, however, that tensions between church and state disappeared everywhere. Argentina, the pope's birthplace, naturally treated the funeral as a major diplomatic event: beyond the delegation, seven days of national mourning were declared (Buenos Aires Herald 2025). In other South American countries, such as Venezuela, relations between church and state had become deeply strained. It was therefore surprising that Nicolás Maduro spoke appreciatively of the pope and even sent Foreign Minister Yván Gil, along with Caracas Mayor Carmen Meléndez, to the funeral. Through this gesture, they sought to signal that a rethinking of diplomatic relations with the Holy See was important (Mazo4F 2025). Nicaragua's situation is even more difficult, as the country suspended diplomatic relations with the Holy See. The Ortega government has institutionally and systematically persecuted the church. Ambassadors accredited to Spain and Italy were nevertheless sent to the funeral, while official communications emphasized that, despite the suspension of diplomatic relations, attendance at the funeral was considered important (Gooren 2010; Berg 2022). This gesture, however, was directed more toward the international community and the UN, which had condemned Nicaragua for violations of religious freedom. By contrast, in the vast majority of South American countries—such as Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Colombia—church–state relations are characterized by partnership, a fact clearly reflected in the representation and statements of their delegations.

9. Papal Funerals as a Place of Interfaith and Ecumenical Dialogue

The funerals of John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis had already taken on an ecumenical and interfaith character (Wilson 1967, p. 379). The Catholic Church's relations with other Christian denominations and with non-Christian religions vary in intensity, whether in theological dialogue or in addressing social challenges (Vázquez Jiménez 2025). The latter dimension, in particular (Gopin 2000), enhances the church's credibility in areas of crisis. Papal funerals serve as a reflection of this dynamic (Kelly 1990).

9.1. *The Presence of Non-Catholic Christian Communities at Papal Funerals*

From a Catholic perspective, relations with Orthodox churches are diverse and dynamic. Papal funerals are a good symbol of the level of dialogue. The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Holy See, in particular, must be understood in the light of Soviet geopolitics after World War II (Luxmoore and Babiuch 1999). The delegation to John XXIII's funeral (Bishop Vladimir Kotlyarov, theology professor Vitaly Borovoy, and Nikolai Finogenov) (New York Times 1963) attended with state approval (Catholic News Agency 2019). Their presence was motivated less by ecumenical concerns than by Soviet aims to reinforce the continuation of John XXIII's Eastern policy. The Soviets likewise exploited ecumenical opportunities at the funeral of Paul VI. Patriarch Pimen of Moscow stated on the pope's merits at the time of his death (Pimen 1978, p. 5).⁴ Pimen, however, was known to have ties to the KGB (Stan 2021, p. 232), and his message conveyed the Kremlin's interest in sustaining the Holy See's Eastern policy. The Orthodox Church was, in fact, represented not by Pimen but by Metropolitan Nicodim (Rotov) of Leningrad and Novgorod, who was well acquainted with the ecumenical efforts of the Second Vatican Council. This conveyed the subtle message that the patriarchate wished to limit the relationship to the metropolitan level. Taken together, these circumstances highlight that while the Catholic Church was motivated by theological considerations, the Soviet side instrumentalized ecumenism for covert operations and political purposes (Pospelovsky 1998). Nevertheless, the funeral was an opportunity for a kind of encounter and dialogue. After the Cold War,

successive popes sought to deepen relations between the two churches. At John Paul II's funeral, Kirill—then Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad—represented the Orthodox Church. Although this constituted high-level representation, the principle remained that papal funerals were attended only at the metropolitan level. Pope Francis later met with Patriarch Kirill and issued a joint statement on peace (Francis and Kirill 2016). Relations, however, regressed in the context of the Russian–Ukrainian war. This regression was not fully evident at the funeral, where the Orthodox Church was represented at the customary metropolitan level (by Metropolitan Anthony of Volokolamsk) (USCCB 2025). This restraint can also be attributed to the fact that Pope Francis's statements on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict were not always unambiguous (Mostepaniuk 2025).

In relations with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, personal relationships, like the historic meeting between Paul VI and Athenagoras I, (Paul VI 1965b; Georgiadis 1965, p. 544), John Paul II's joint environmental declaration with Bartholomew, (John Paul II 2002) or Pope Francis's cooperation with the patriarch on security issues (Chryssavgis 2007, pp. 249–64) have played a decisive role. This quality of dialogue was also evident at papal funerals (Dimitriadou 2016). Athenagoras I issued a statement and sent a delegation to Paul VI's funeral, while Bartholomew personally attended the funerals of both John Paul II (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America 2005) and Pope Francis (Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America 2025).

Relations with the Anglican Communion developed along similar lines (Paul VI and Ramsey 1966; Pawley 1966). For the first time since the Reformation, former Archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey attended the funeral of Paul VI (Catholic News Service 1978). At John Paul II's funeral, Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams headed the official delegation, reflecting his openness to joint social engagement with the Catholic Church (Jones 2021). Pope Francis likewise issued joint statements (Francis and Welby 2016) and joined in prayer with Anglican leaders (Anglican Focus 2021). At his funeral, the delegation was led by Marinez Bassotto, Brazil's first female Anglican primate (Diocese in Europe 2025). Although Francis maintained the conservative Catholic position on women's ordination, the Vatican refrained from criticizing this Anglican decision. This situation conveyed a mutual understanding: while the Anglicans did not expect the Catholic Church to alter its practice, they did expect their community to be accepted on its own terms.

Representatives of the World Council of Churches (WCC) also illustrate the development of ecumenism. The organization did not yet participate in the funeral of John XXIII, though General Secretary Willem A. Visser 't Hooft sent a telegram of condolence (Zeilstra 2020). The pope's death created uncertainty within the WCC regarding the future of dialogue. Paul VI was the first pope to visit Geneva, the organization's headquarters—a visit given particular weight by joint humanitarian initiatives. As a result, the WCC sent an official delegation to Paul VI's funeral. This practice continued at John Paul II's funeral, where General Secretary Samuel Kobia headed the delegation (Vatican 2005), and at Benedict XVI's funeral, where Bishop Heinrich Bedford-Strohm was present. At the funeral of Pope Francis, too, a high-level delegation attended, underscoring the WCC's emphasis on the pope's initiatives for peace (World Council of Churches 2025). The participation of non-Catholic denominations in papal funerals is a relatively new development. It signals a commitment to dialogue that extends across numerous social dimensions—from joint statements and common prayer to coordinated action.

9.2. *The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Papal Funerals*

Following the Second Vatican Council, the church's relationship with other religions underwent a profound transformation, and Papal funerals also highlight interfaith dialogue. Regarding the Jewish communities, the power vacuum created by the death of a pope

always left them vulnerable to atrocities (Grayzel 1969). Historically, for them, it was of great importance who would be chosen as the pontiff (Stow 2001). The Second Vatican Council initiated change, yet time was required before Jewish communities, after centuries of hostility, came to trust in it (Kertzer 2002). At the funeral of John XXIII, representatives of significant Jewish organizations, including the World Jewish Congress, the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, and B'nai B'rith, were already present (New York Times 1963). Their attendance conveyed to the College of Cardinals, alongside their respect for the deceased pope, the message that the path he had begun was essential to continue. Leaders of Jewish organizations—such as the American Jewish Committee and the World Jewish Congress—sent telegrams of condolence to the funerals of Paul VI and John Paul I. Jewish public figures were also present in an unofficial capacity (Lee 2006, p. 454). Owing to the Second Vatican Council and John Paul II's personal commitment, Jewish organizations, including the World Jewish Congress and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, sent official representatives to his funeral (Vatican News 2025). As Randy Lee observed, the “worldwide mourning in which Jewry also shared proved that the pope had built a real bridge between the two religions” (Lee 2006, p. 454). John Paul II indeed emphasized the concept of the “irrevocable covenant,” condemned anti-Semitism, acknowledged Christian responsibility, visited Auschwitz and the Roman synagogue, and elevated diplomatic relations with Israel to the highest level (Fisher and Klenicki 2003).

Delegations from Jewish religious organizations also attended the funeral of Benedict XVI (Vatican News 2023). The pope had visited Israel and the Palestinian Territories, acknowledged the suffering of the Jewish people, yet his theological writings remained subjects of debate. His visits themselves were messages of interfaith dialogue, though he did not assume a mediating role and continued to uphold the two-state concept (Henrix 2010). The presence of Jewish communities at his funeral was therefore more a tribute to the theologian and pontiff than a geopolitical reflection. Pope Francis, in his final public address, explicitly rejected anti-Semitism. Jewish–Catholic relations reached an unprecedented level, although disagreements emerged over his Middle Eastern policy, particularly in relation to Israel. The World Jewish Congress delegation was headed by Claudio Epelman, director of the Latin American Jewish Congress—a subtle reference to the pope's South American roots (World Jewish Congress 2025).

Regarding Muslim communities, it is notable that their presence was particularly significant at the funeral of Pope John Paul II. This event marked a milestone in Muslim–Christian dialogue and reflected the commitments of the Second Vatican Council. John Paul II was the first pope to visit a mosque (in Damascus), and he initiated numerous meetings, joint prayers, and declarations (Olizar 2021, pp. 199–202). He recognized tendencies toward radicalization arising from the situation of Muslim communities, but correctly attributed these not to religion itself but to geopolitical factors (John Paul II 1994). He visited numerous Muslim-majority countries and continued to call for peaceful coexistence even after 9/11 (Guat Kwee 2005). The Holy See's dialogue was particularly evident in the presence of Muslim leaders at his funeral, including Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and King Abdullah II of Jordan (Al Jazeera 2005). Additionally, representatives from Algeria, Indonesia, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority were also in attendance. The funeral thus highlighted the Holy See's vast geopolitical potential in dialogue. Muslim religious leaders likewise expressed condolences at the pope's death. During the pontificate of John Paul II, a permanent dialogue committee was established at Cairo's Al-Azhar University, which issued a statement and sent representatives to the funeral (Come and See 2005). Statements by other regional Muslim leaders, such as Mustafa Cerić, Grand

Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina, highlighted the Holy See's role in regional peace diplomacy (HINA 2005).

Benedict XVI's papacy was overshadowed by the controversy surrounding his Regensburg speech (Althouse and Anderson 2019, pp. 311–23). From a Muslim perspective, his funeral did not carry global significance; representation was limited to Imam Yahya Pallavicini of the Italian Muslim community. This, however, underscored the fragility of dialogue. According to Belhaj Abdessamad, Pope Francis concentrated on global issues such as fraternity, peace, environmental protection, and migration—topics of particular relevance for Muslim countries (Abdessamad 2024). At his funeral, governments from geopolitically sensitive Muslim-majority states, including Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, and Morocco, were represented. The sentiment of the Muslim world was aptly summarized by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar University, who described the pope at the funeral as “a true friend of Muslims” (The Arab Weekly 2025).

10. And Those Who Did Not Participate . . .

It is equally revealing when a country or organization is absent from a papal funeral or represented at a lower level than expected. In the case of Pius XII, Eastern Bloc countries did not participate in his funeral due to the pope's anti-communist stance.

Absence has also at times served as a form of protest against the Holy See's geopolitics. The People's Republic of China, for example, not only declined to participate in the funeral of John Paul II but also imposed a complete media blackout on the event, thereby signaling opposition to the Vatican's diplomatic relations with Taiwan (Clafin 2024). China likewise abstained from participation in the funeral of Pope Francis for the same reason. Under Francis, some signs of dialogue between the two sides were observable (Lombardi 2018, pp. 7–16; Spadaro 2018), and this was also evident at the time of his death. A Foreign Ministry spokesperson at a relatively low level, nonetheless issued a brief communication. At the regular press briefing the day after the pope's death, condolences were expressed, and an indication was given that China was ready to improve dialogue. Yet because of the Holy See's continued relationship with Taiwan, enduring difficulties can be expected between Beijing and the Vatican. President Vladimir Putin likewise did not attend the funeral, although his presence was never seriously expected. The Russian Federation was represented by Culture Minister Olga Lyubimova. The level of representation also reflected Pope Francis's ambivalent stance on the Russian–Ukrainian conflict (Smytsnyuk 2023).

Pope Francis repeatedly criticized Israeli military operations in Gaza and Israeli policy more broadly. It is therefore unsurprising that, while President Moshe Katsav and Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom attended the funeral of John Paul II, only Israel's ambassador, Yaron Sideman, represented the country at the funeral of Pope Francis (Fortuna 2025). Moreover, Israel issued an official statement on the pope's death only on the third day after the event. One of the most complex challenges for the Holy See will remain its dialogue with Israel, given the diplomatic, security, and interfaith sensitivities of the region (Perko 2001, p. 26). The funeral illustrated that the Holy See stands caught between two sides on this issue. Numerous Muslim-majority countries, including Turkish President Erdoğan, used the occasion to acknowledge the pope's efforts on behalf of the Palestinians (Türkiye Anadolu Agency 2025). The contrast between the high-level representation of Muslim-majority states (e.g., Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon) and Israel's minimal representation was striking (Lucente 2025).

Representatives of both NATO and the African Union attended the funeral of John Paul II, but neither organization was present at the funeral of Pope Francis. Although Francis was more critical of NATO, it is unlikely that this alone explains their absence. Rather, NATO has never been a primary focus of the Holy See's diplomatic relations (Beyer

2024, pp. 162–89). The African Union did state the pope's death, acknowledging Francis's efforts in addressing various security challenges (African Union 2025). Given the Union's relatively loose federal character (Mathews 2005), it was understandable that individual African states chose to represent themselves separately at the funeral.

11. Conclusions

Examining papal funerals reveals that these events transcend purely religious ceremonies. They have become a component of international relations. While funerals have always carried geopolitical significance, they gained particular weight in light of the dialogue-oriented philosophy of the Second Vatican Council. Advances in transportation and communication technologies made it possible for the church's message to reach millions of people through these events.

The findings of this research support three main conclusions.

The liturgical frameworks of funerals themselves carry messages. The simplifications introduced by Paul VI, John Paul II's relegation, and Pope Francis's choice of the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore were all deliberate communication strategies reflecting the papacy's evolving self-understanding. Homilies likewise transcend the framework of funeral orations, serving instead as condensed summaries of the Holy See's peace policy and dialogue. The consistent emphasis on peace and social justice in these texts is not accidental but constitutes an integral element of the Holy See's geopolitical positioning.

Second, following the council, papal funerals assumed an interdenominational and interfaith character, uniquely highlighting the Holy See's capacities and the state of its relations with particular religions or denominations.

Third, the increasing presence of Global South countries at papal funerals reflects a broader shift in geopolitical centers of gravity. Whereas European and North American delegations still dominated in the mid-twentieth century, by the twenty-first century, African, Asian, and Latin American states had emerged as key actors. This development reflects not only the Catholic Church's demographic transformation but also the Holy See's reorientation toward the peripheries.

Together, they offer a rejection of the thesis advanced in Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations," which argues that the fault lines of global conflict will be defined by cultural and religious identities, but, according to the modern papal funerals, this is not the case. The orderly coming together of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish representatives from rival nations shows how religion can be a means of facilitating dialogue rather than a source of conflict. So, in this respect, papal funerals represent rare but effective civilizational bridges that show that the Holy See can ease the strains of geopolitics and encourage a sense of coexistence.

In conclusion, papal funerals can be regarded as unique events within international relations. They intertwine the sacred and the profane, the religious and the political. Such occasions serve not only as demonstrations of the Holy See's diplomatic capacity but also as mirrors of global geopolitical dynamics. Through them, one can gain valuable insight into the functioning of the international system and the operation of soft power mechanisms from the perspective of the Holy See.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ His most well-known document is the encyclical *Rerum novarum* (Leo XIII 1891, pp. 641–70).
- ² John Paul II's constitution on elections, however, made no such reference (John Paul II 1996). By then, the Holy See's extensive diplomatic network had become the responsibility of the Secretariat of State.
- ³ For example, the trip to Bogota took place one year after the social encyclical *Populorum progressio* was published (Paul VI 1967).
- ⁴ "We highly appreciate the work of the late Pope Paul VI in developing fraternal relations between the Roman Catholic and the Russian Orthodox Churches. We pray fervently that God may grant rest to the soul of our deceased brother, Pope Paul VI, in the realm of the righteous."

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