The Catholic Church is not confined to a particular territory and she has no geographical borders . . . it goes without saying that the Apostolic See has no thought or intention of failing to give due respect to the sovereign prerogatives of any state.

Pope John Paul II

This chapter examines the Catholic Church – one of the oldest and largest transnational actors of all. Organized Catholicism has a uniquely wide range of groups within its structures, ranging from the smallest level of sub-parochial units through to missionary religious orders, such as the Jesuits, that can claim to be prototypes of globalization. With around one billion baptized Catholics and a presence in nearly every state the Church remains a major power within many societies; whilst the evangelizing impulse which is intrinsic to Christianity has left an enduring and dynamic legacy for the transmission of influence. That influence has often been seen in material terms, for example the Vatican’s long and bitter struggle for statehood that culminated in the Lateran treaties. However, the Church has usually regarded the formation of values, beliefs and culture as the key battleground – hence the enormous effort devoted to establishing Catholic schools, universities, newspapers, radio stations and political parties which would, in turn, secure a significant Catholic input into society. Much of that effort has traditionally been subcontracted out to religious orders, development agencies and the so-called ‘new movements’ such as the Focolare.

The relationship between the Holy See (the juridical term refers to the Church as a political and spiritual entity) and these groups has to be seen as dynamic. The Church’s voluntary groups represent an extraordinary diversity of views and approaches. Indeed, many supposedly Catholic groups have far more in common with their secular counterparts than they do with their co-religionists. It is also more accurate to talk about Catholic NGOs rather than the Church as a whole conforming to that category since the Holy See is a state, albeit the world’s
smallest, and exhibits all the characteristics of a state within an anarchical environment. It is in the relationship between the central authority (Rome) and that array of Catholic organizations that questions of autonomy and authority become deeply problematic, since for many people contact with Catholicism comes through involvement with a Catholic NGO rather than with the hierarchy. Therefore, the question of who speaks for the Church becomes a highly significant issue within an organization obsessed with reconciling pluralism with centralized authority.

In this chapter, we will analyse the historical evolution and contemporary character of transnational Catholic political behaviour before examining both the range of Catholic groups operating transnationally, such as religious orders, and the role of the Holy See as an international actor. It is suggested that the continued growth of diverse transnational Catholic movements, especially in the human rights sector, will result in increasing tensions between different ecclesial models. This, in turn, will provoke widely differing responses to the political and social challenges that the Church faces as a global actor.

Before looking at the role the contemporary Church plays in global affairs, it is important to identify some of the enduring patterns of behaviour, such as the missionary impulse, which are central to its role and self-image. That sense of mission, in turn, shapes the way the Church conceives of itself as a body which cannot ultimately allow itself to be limited by states and legal boundaries. In terms of its relations with secular power, there is clearly a long history of coexistence, co-option and conflict with the state that shapes the Church’s contemporary behaviour. Indeed, any organization which developed within an empire, is governed in imperial fashion by a monarch, and which predates the modern international system by centuries is likely to regard the exclusivity of the sovereign state with some misgivings. The Church has also striven to retain its global ambitions even in the post-Westphalian environment, showing a chameleon-like ability to use and bypass the state when it suited its purposes.

Yet any analysis of the Church is faced with the problem of accounting theoretically for an institution which is simultaneously a closely controlled autocracy and perhaps, by several indices, the world’s most diverse group, containing around one billion people of nearly every race and culture. As Fred Halliday has pointed out above in this volume, there is sometimes a danger of seeing non-state actors (NSAs), like apple pie and motherhood, as good almost by definition. Few people would make that error with such a long-established and controversial actor as the Catholic Church. Indeed, many of the recent accusations made by NGOs over the World Trade Organization’s lack of accountability find echoes in the historic criticisms levelled against the Church. Groups that operate transnationally have often provoked fear and mistrust rather than admiration. That trend has been even more evident where the Church is concerned, simply because of Catholicism’s universalist claims that run headlong