

The Scandinavian Catholic Missions in the *relationes ad limina* to Propaganda Fide (1948-58)

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Abstract The Scandinavian Peninsula was a Catholic mission territory subjected to the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith until 1977. During the 1950s, these Nordic missions were gradually raised to the level of local churches, despite the slow progress of evangelisation. The *relationes ad limina* that bishops and vicars sent to Propaganda Fide in this decade and the reports of the Apostolic Visit of 1956 represent two different points of view through which the article tries to define the achievement of the Congregation's objectives, the missionary strategies, the commitment of religious orders and congregations.

Keywords Scandinavia. Catholic mission. Catholic evangelisation. Propaganda Fide. Nordic countries. Missionary congregations. Missionary orders.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Scandinavian Catholic Missions According to the *relationes ad limina*. – 3 Missionary Strategies (and Abilities) in Comparison. – 4 Conclusions.



Peer review

Submitted 2022-08-17
Accepted 2022-10-24
Published 2022-12-13

Open access

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Citation Menti, D. (2022). "The Scandinavian Catholic Missions in the *Relationes ad limina* to Propaganda Fide (1948-58)". *JoMaCC. Journal of Modern and Contemporary Christianity*, 1(2), 301-320.

DOI 10.30687/JoMaCC/2785-6046/2022/02/006

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1 Introduction

Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden were European mission territories subjected to the Roman Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide) until 1977.

The Reformation and the consequent imposition of Lutheranism as the official religion of the State by the local monarchies (according to the principle *Cuius regio eius religio*) during the seventeenth century implicated a period of decline for Catholicism in the Scandinavian Peninsula, worsen by a severe anti-Catholic legislation. Catholics achieved formal equality in Denmark when freedom of religion was introduced with the Constitution of 1849, as well as in Finland with Act on Freedom of Religion in 1923. In 1845, non-Lutheran churches were permitted to establish communities in Norway, but the constitutional ban on the Society of Jesus remained until 1956. In 1869, the Swedish Dissenter Act legalised conversions to other Christian denominations, but full religious freedom was introduced only in 1951.

These openings to Catholicism during the nineteenth century together with the renovated impulse which characterised the missionary activity, meant for the Scandinavian countries their transformation into autonomous mission territories, no more subjected to the Apostolic Prefecture of North Pole or to the Apostolic Vicariate of the Nordic Missions.¹

During the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, in particular in 1953 and in 1955, the missionary churches in Scandinavia (with the exception of northern and central Norway) obtained the definitive *status* of dioceses, thus concluding that ecclesiastical *iter* through which the Congregation of Propaganda Fide aims at the constitution of the so-called 'native' or 'local' churches, with their own ecclesiastical hierarchy.

As a consequence, the second post-war period could be considered an interesting point of observation of the Catholic Church in Scandinavia, presuming a consolidated situation on an institutional level, but also considering the missionary strategies, the presence of religious orders and congregations, the achievement of Propaganda's objectives such as for example the appointment of the native clergy, etc.

In this perspective, the *relationes ad limina* addressed by the Scandinavian bishops and apostolic vicars to the Roman Congregation between 1948 and 1958 have been considered in this article as the primary source, useful to give an immediate image of the state of these missions from an internal point of view.

Moreover, the article considers the four final reports that Mons. Antoon Hanssen, coadjutor in Roermond, wrote as a result of the Apostolic Visit to Scandinavia he made from May to August 1956 on be-

¹ Tüchle, H. "Hilfe auf dem Weg zur Selbständigkeit".

half of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide. They often give a more exhaustive contextualisation, but also a critical point of view on those aspects that the Holy See considered crucial in a missionary context.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the historiography of the Catholic Church in Scandinavia,² which has focused also on the origins and consequences of a deep-rooted anti-Catholic sentiment in these countries, actually, pointing out the transnational character of anti-Catholicism and its importance for the processes of national identity formation in the official Protestant countries in general.³

Moreover, the topic could give a more exhaustive image of the situation of the Catholic Church in Europe as well as of its missionary activity in the second post-war period during which it had to rethink its presence and its methods, in the face of important political, social and cultural changes that affected the extra-European territories in particular.

The Scandinavian missions represented a special testbed as well, characterised by very similar dynamics despite a different background. The traditional missionary approach, in this case also conditioned by the anti-Protestant controversy that still characterised the pontificate of Pius XII, indirectly clashed with a new sensitivity, less inclined to quantify the progress of the apostolate in terms of conversions and foundation of churches and mission stations, but interested in investing in the quality of the apostolate and in the implementation of initiatives (press, radio, etc.) aimed at earning social visibility and influence to the Catholic minority.⁴ Consequently, from these two approaches derived different interpretations of the causes of the objective difficulties of Catholicism in terms of conversions and of struggle against the spread of religious indifferentism.

2 The Scandinavian Catholic Missions According to the *relationes ad limina*

Between 1948 and 1958 each of the bishops and vicars of Scandinavia sent to the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith at least one *relatio ad limina*, based on the questionnaire it formulated in 1922 for the mission territories.⁵ The answers to the 90 points of the questionnaire are rather telegraphic, consequently many *relationes* consid-

² Cf. Pagano, "Iniziative di studio ed edizioni delle fonti".

³ Cf. the essays in Werner, Harvard, *European Anti-Catholicism*.

⁴ For the analysis of the 'ecclesiocentric' and 'soteriological' concepts, cf. Mondin, *Dizionario storico e teologico delle missioni*, 240-2.

⁵ AAS (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*), 14 (1922), 287-307.

ered in this article do not count more than twenty pages.⁶ This conciseness could be justified by the fact that bishops and vicars had to report annually about the progress of the missions through the so-called *Prospectus status missionis*: therefore, the Congregation was constantly up-to-date with the results achieved in every field of the missionary apostolate thanks to these detailed reports made up of numbers (Catholic presence, conversions, weddings, places of worship, priests, schools etc.), to which the senders sometimes added final brief comments.

The same attention to the development of the ‘visible church’ also characterises the questionnaire and consequently the *relationes* themselves: what emerges is a rather homogeneous scenario, where Catholics in Scandinavia represented a tiny minority. In Denmark, for example, where the balance was generally considered more encouraging than that of the other Scandinavian countries, there were 23,000 Catholics on 4,100,000 inhabitants in 1949, that increased to 26,872 on 4,309,000 inhabitants in 1952. But, as visitor Hanssen pointed out, this was a relative advantage attributable to a Polish Catholic *enclave* established in the southern part of the country in the early twentieth century.

Arriving in Denmark from Finland and Sweden, one has the impression of a country where the Catholic Church really means something; but coming from Germany, Belgium or Holland the impression is that of a weak Catholicism of the diaspora. The advantage of Denmark over the other Scandinavian countries is due to the strong immigration of Polish peasants at the beginning of the century.⁷

In relation to the number of inhabitants, the Catholic presence recorded the lowest level in the Apostolic Vicariate of Central Norway: in 1949 the International Agency Fides recorded 233 Catholics out of 500,000 inhabitants, increased to 430 in 1958.⁸ Finnish Catholics (2,078 on 4,121,835 inhabitants in 1953) were numerically inferior

⁶ For the period here considered, Mons. Johannes Wember (1939-1976) did not send reports from the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Norway, while there are two *relationes* from the diocese of Oslo which Mons. Jacques Mangers (1932-1964) wrote in French and without following the trace of the questionnaire. The report that Mons. Theodor Suhr (1938-1964) sent from Denmark in 1952 has 70 pages, but it covers 13 years (1939-52).

⁷ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 95. Unless otherwise specified, all the translations are by the Author.

⁸ According to official statistics published by the International Agency Fides for 1949 there were: 14,272 Catholics (on 6,950,000 inhabitants) in Sweden; 3,800 Catholics (on 2,340,000 inhabitants) in the Apostolic Vicariate of Oslo; 226 Catholics (on 360,000 inhabitants) in the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Norway; 1,780 Catholics (on 3,955,000 inhabitants) in Finland (Agenzia Internazionale Fides, *Le missioni cattoliche*, 62-7).

to the Orthodox (70,000), actually surpassing only the Jews (2,000) and the Muslims (600) even if, as Bishop Wilhelm Cobben (1933-1967) highlighted, this mission could not be compared to the other Scandinavian ones, due to its latest foundation (1920).⁹

The Catholic presence was generally represented by converts and their children. Bishops and vicars claimed a slow but steady progress of these numbers, however with some clarifications. For example, Mangers explained that the increase from 4,500 to 5,544 Catholics in the five year from 1953 to 58 in the diocese of Oslo, was mostly due to the presence of 600 Hungarian refugees, while there were only 241 conversions.

Furthermore, there were territories that the missionaries had not approached yet: Lapland, because of the difficult language and the nomadic life, and northern Finland because sparsely populated.

The Scandinavian episcopate agreed that over the last twenty years many prejudices against the Catholic Church had fallen. This was proved by the progressive amendment of the anti-Catholic legislation, despite the absence of political representation or political weight. It had gained esteem and consideration among the population (Hanssen underlined that the episcopate's conduct during the Second World War played an important role in this sense, improving relations also with the respective governments and monarchies) and "being a Catholic was no longer considered a dishonour or an inferiority as it was still twenty or thirty years ago".¹⁰ According to Bishop Johannes Müller (1922-1957), the condition of the Catholic Church in Sweden had greatly improved after the law on religious freedom in force since January 1952; despite the fact that the approval process had been slowed down by fear of the "Catholic danger",¹¹ he claimed that Catholics were no longer considered enemies of the country. The fight against the Catholic Church had almost ceased, while the attacks from the Protestant sects, Pentecostals in particular, had strengthened.

Non-Catholics used to participate in Catholic celebrations as well as in apologetic or doctrinal lectures organised in or outside the churches (in Denmark, "highly skilled priests"¹² preached several times a year on radio broadcasts), while the Catholic press had a good circulation also among the Protestants. Each mission published one or more journals, such as the Swedish fortnightly *Hemmet och Helgedomen* (*Focus et Ara*) and the monthly *Skyddsängel* (*Anegelus Custos*) for Swedish youth, the Finnish *Uskon Sanoma*, and *St. Olav* in Nor-

⁹ Finland 1948, 615. Cf. Pettinaroli, *La politique russe du Sainte-Siège*.

¹⁰ Oslo 1954, 123.

¹¹ Cf. Werner, "The Catholic Danger".

¹² Denmark 1952, 487.

way; other journals such as the Danish *Catholica*, the Finnish *Documenta* and the Swedish *Credo* were addressed to the academic *milieu*.¹³

However, as clearly explained by Mangers, “we cannot expect mass conversions yet”: in the “highly civilised” and “advanced” (recurring adjectives both in the *relationes* and in Hanssen’s reports) but at the same time secularised and materialistic Scandinavian societies, “religious indifferentism has horribly grown”.¹⁴

“The Protestant or rather materialistic environment” made religious practice often rather difficult, consequently the Catholic minority had to oppose a deep religious conviction and a strong will in order to not to be “infected”.¹⁵ Coexistence with Lutherans and “neo-pagans” inevitably caused some spiritual damages concerning religious practice, but also Catholic education of the children, and marriage morality.¹⁶ Bishops and vicars considered mixed marriages between Catholics and Protestants an inevitable consequence of being a religious minority; priests had to treat these couples with a certain indulgence to avoid their estrangement and guarantee the Catholic education of the children.

Facing these already deeply-rooted tendencies, the Church had to put efforts into the defence of the Catholic minority from the influences of the context, not always with positive results. Once again, the bishop of Oslo expressed his opinion more openly: the first generation of Norwegian converts “held up quite well”, while the second and the third ones often lost themselves, despite the missionaries’ efforts. Few left the Church officially, “but indifference does its damages”.¹⁷

Moreover, as for the rest of European and Western society, the *liberalis vitae consuetudo* had its repercussions on sexual morality (divorce, abortion, voluntary limitation of births, etc.). However, these aspects are not particularly highlighted in the *relationes*. The tones used by the bishops distinguished themselves from those – quite exasperated – used by other ecclesiastical personalities in their letters to Rome, in a sort of attempt to justify “the apparent sterility of missionary work”. Father Govaart, the general superior of the Fathers of the Sacred Heart, answering to the Cardinal Fumasoni Biondi about the religious situation in Finland, wrote that in these countries, where four centuries of ruling Lutheranism had caused a disastrous level of religious nihilism, the work of these “heroic missionaries” could not be very fruitful.

¹³ Norway did not have a proper scientific journal, but Hanssen considered the level of *St. Olav* still too high for simple people, while Bishop Mangers considered it “probably the best in Scandinavia” (Oslo 1958, 153).

¹⁴ Denmark 1952, 527.

¹⁵ Oslo 1954, 123.

¹⁶ Sweden 1954, 405.

¹⁷ Oslo 1958, 152.

A Lutheranism which has even lost faith in the divinity of Jesus has reigned here for centuries with a consequent practical materialism and widespread sensualism that produce an environment which is refractory to the Catholic religion: it is like a modern paganism, which has rejected redemption.¹⁸

The *relationes* tried to catch the attention of the Roman Congregation to 'structural' deficiencies that affected all the Scandinavian missions. The most serious problem, the "vital, a to be or not to be issue for the Catholic Church"¹⁹ was the scholastic one. For the period here considered, there were no higher-grade Catholic schools (only Denmark had catholic middle schools) and parish primary schools were insufficient. Private schools were "barely tolerated" in Norway²⁰ and only Danish Catholic school have received public subsidies since 1946. Nevertheless, Bishop Theodor Suhr (1938-1964), as well as all the other heads of the Scandinavian missions, lamented the impossibility of Catholic schools to compete with public Protestant ones, defined as "sumptuous"²¹ (*luxuriosas*), equipped with every service and "perfect from all points of view".²²

The bishops in particular believed that not even the teaching (given by sisters, often too old) was up to the high Scandinavian standard which therefore required Catholic schools not only modern structures, but also "competent staff", "teachers of good culture, morally strong and animated by apostolic zeal".²³ For these reasons, many Catholic parents sent their children to Protestant state schools, also because sometimes these were much closer, while Catholic education was guaranteed by the parish catechism, although with some gaps. In Denmark, for example, one third of the parishes did not have a Catholic school: the priests' efforts to guarantee the teaching of Christian doctrine directly in the children's houses "are greater than the results", while the others had to be considered practically "lost for the church".²⁴

The places of worship were another 'structural' concern that bishops and vicars had in common. The Scandinavian missions, for the period here considered, were organised in *quasi*-parishes, for the most part with their own church or chapel and a permanently resident priest. The great distances that characterise these countries prevented a con-

¹⁸ Govaart, *Letter* 1953, 50-64.

¹⁹ Ap. Visit. Sweden 1954, 91.

²⁰ Oslo 1954, 122.

²¹ Denmark 1952, 502.

²² Oslo 1954, 122.

²³ Sweden 1954, 408.

²⁴ Denmark 1952, 510.

siderable number of Catholics from participating in religious celebrations. For this reason, bishops and vicars were generally worried, despite the financial difficulties, to expand the offer of places of worship, in addition to the semi-public chapels made available by religious orders and to other halls set up for this purpose.

Almost all the authors of the *relationes* (and the apostolic visitor himself) considered the 'distance issue' a not secondary obstacle to the religious practice. Some of them even mentioned the difficulties experienced by the priests themselves, in terms of efforts to guarantee regular visits to the most distant communities, but also in terms of personal solitude.²⁵

Concerning the clergy involved in the *cura animarum*, numbers were also quite contained and relatively stable during the 1950s; but while bishops Suhr and Müller complained that the number of priests was not sufficient for the needs of the Danish and Swedish missions (97 and 57 respectively, even though they argued that other priests would be economically unsustainable), Mons. Johannes Rùth (1953-1974) considered the five fathers of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary (to whom the Vicariate of Central Norway had been assigned) sufficient in relation to the scarce presence of Catholic believers (430 in 1958).

Generally, the regular clergy played a significant role, in particular thanks to the *jus commissionis* or *commissio missionum*, according to which the pope assigned a mission to a single religious order or missionary congregation with the main objective of avoiding rivalry between missionaries belonging to different orders or nationalities, which could negatively affect the evangelisation progresses.²⁶ In addition to the Vicariate of Central Norway, the missions of northern Norway and Finland were assigned respectively to the Missionaries of the Holy Family (6 in 1956) and to the Fathers of the Sacred Heart (5 in 1948).

In the other Scandinavian missions, which were assigned to the secular clergy, the regular one was generally in the majority, predominantly Jesuits (from the province of Cologne) and Dominicans (from the province of Paris), followed by Redemptorists, Franciscans and Marists (from the Dutch province), variously involved in parishes, in the university apostolate, etc. There were also not incardinated priests, responsible for the spiritual assistance of linguistic minority groups, for example two Italian Conventuals Franciscans in Sweden, an Italian priest and a German one (responsible for the Polish and Baltic refugees) in Denmark.

The Danish diocese had about ten male orders and congregations within its borders and, according to Suhr, the number of regular

²⁵ Sweden 1954, 402; Oslo 1958, 149.

²⁶ Cf. Metzler, *La Santa Sede e le missioni*, 47-8.

priests had always exceeded that of seculars (respectively 63 and 34 in 1952), who also managed 16 parishes on a total of 36 and a consequent lower number of believers (10,200 against 16,100). Only in the diocese of Oslo, contrary to the other Scandinavian missions, the number of seculars exceeded that of regulars, even if only little.

The female religious were in clear majority compared to the male clergy. In 1952 in Denmark there were 759 sisters (393 sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry, followed by 116 sisters of St. Hedwig), a “surprising” number according to Hanssen, who defines their work “a Catholic oasis”;²⁷ in Oslo there were 480 sisters (of whom 250 sisters of St. Joseph of Chambéry). Various and involved in the management of kindergartens, primary schools, orphanages, hospitals and retirement homes, generally all those charitable institutes *diffundendae fidei utilibus*. Apart from the deficiencies highlighted in the teaching field, considered not up to the Scandinavian standards, in general the *relationes* express great esteem for the “invaluable services”²⁸ provided by female religious congregations as the best collaborators of bishops and priests in the Scandinavian missions, helping to drop prejudices against the Catholic Church. Moreover, their health-care institutes, so useful for spreading the faith because frequented also by non-Catholics, were the only Catholic ones able to compete with the high standards of these countries. For these reasons, despite the apparent considerable numbers, the decline in female vocations was a great concern for the Scandinavian episcopate. Hanssen also showed to Propaganda Fide another interesting aspect. The remarkable financial resources of some female congregations (“their hospitals [of the sisters of St. Joseph] earn a lot”) certainly represented a considerable help for the needs of the parishes, often without a fixed income; but at the same time this dependence gave the impression that the apostolate was carried on entirely by the sisters. This situation was particularly evident in the diocese of Oslo, where people joked about the birth of an “ecclesiastical matriarchy”.²⁹ In the visitor’s opinion, this was a sign of regression, therefore suggesting to no longer concentrate large female congregations in hospitals, given also the growing competition from public institutes.

Small groups of Petites Soeurs de Jésus or de Charles de Foucauld were in Copenhagen (3), Helsinki (3) and Oslo (2).³⁰ Both the bishops and the visitor were sceptical about their attempts to catholicise the Scandinavian working class by sharing its lifestyle (Müller de-

²⁷ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 116.

²⁸ Oslo 1954, 122.

²⁹ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 26, 29.

³⁰ Another small group was 170 kilometres from Helsinki, near the Russian border and Bishop Cobben gave it a temporary permission.

nied them access to Sweden). Certainly, the Catholic Church had little hold on it; nonetheless, they considered their tiny presence, their approach (with their “poor dress, almost exotic”) as well as their detachment from the parochial reality worthless for the missions, while it would have been more useful to send a Dominican or a German Jesuit expert on social issues, to take contact with the union leaders.³¹

Since its origins, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith had insisted on the importance of supporting vocations among the locals. Already in the *Instructio* of 1659 and again in the missionary encyclicals of the twentieth century, the Holy See reaffirmed the fundamental role of the local clergy who, thanks to the knowledge of the language and culture, would be able to preach the Gospel in a more effective way. The numbers relating to the indigenous Scandinavian clergy in the 1950s justify Propaganda’s insistence on this point. The foreign clergy, mostly of northern European origin (Germany, Holland, France) was still in clear majority. The Danish Suhr was the only native bishop and, although his diocese was the only Scandinavian one assigned to the native clergy, he considered the 42 Danish priests (including 13 who voluntarily opted for Danish nationality) still insufficient if related to the Catholic population. The Swedish diocese, where the Bavarian Bishop Müller referred to himself, to his Danish coadjutor Nelson and to his German Vicar Meyer as “naturalised Swedish”,³² had only 7 native priests on a total of 50 in 1954. The Vicariate of Central Norway, which doubled the number of Catholics in 10 years, had gained only one native vocation in the same period of time (1949-58). Consequently, local representation in the *Consilium Missionis* was generally a minority or even absent.

The *relationes* do not analyse this aspect, but the causes of such a disappointing situation compared to the expectations of Propaganda Fide are understandable, that is the low number of Catholics as well as a deep-rooted anti-Catholic prejudice which, “nurtured since childhood”,³³ made the conversion a brave but rare choice. These reasons – together with financial straits – had probably persuaded the bishops and vicars of the Scandinavian missions to not support the foundation of an inter-Scandinavian seminary. The proposal, strongly supported by the prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide Cardinal Van Rossum during his visit to Scandinavia in 1923, came to nothing after his death. Hanssen himself rejected the project as a premature detachment from the Catholic countries and disrespectful of the cultural differences existing between the Scandinavian peoples.³⁴

³¹ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 121-3.

³² Sweden 1954, 402.

³³ Central Norway 1958, 123.

³⁴ Ap. Visit Denmark 1956, 103.

According to the authors, the same ecclesiastical education received in European seminaries, as well as the missionaries' commitment in the study of the Scandinavian languages, guaranteed a substantial equality between foreign clergy and native priests. Nevertheless, Vicar Rùth exposed himself in his *relatio* by expressing an unsolicited opinion, namely that "the care of souls cannot be entrusted to the native clergy yet".³⁵

Presumably, this stance was based on the effective lack of aspiring priests, but some of Hanssen's notes reveal that there was still a prejudice against converts, even if Christians. He reported the opinion of an old Redemptorist, according to whom "Danes are not made for life in an order or congregation; they are practical and materialistic by nature". More properly, Müller would have said that "we can't expect from them [local priests] all the abilities [*finenze*]; they made a great sacrifice with their conversion [...] they are in another stage of the spiritual life and have their own character, which is neither French nor German".³⁶ Moreover, it was common opinion that a Catholic priest who studied abroad was highly respected, but at the same time the converts were treated as foreigners in their homeland, because Catholicism was perceived as something foreign. As a consequence, those priests were often disappointed or even embittered, a mood sometimes exacerbated by loneliness and lack of dialogue with the bishop or with other priests.³⁷

These were only some aspects concerning that judge of value which Propaganda Fide considered an obstacle to the transformation of the missions into autonomous local churches, as long as the indigenous clergy was considered a mere auxiliary force to the missionary one.

Nonetheless, all the *relationes* reassured the Congregation about the harmony that reigned between the secular and regular clergy, as well as between foreign and local clergy.

Concluding with the *iudicium summatis* of each *relatio*, the lack of places of worship and schools was presented as the sore point of the Scandinavian missions, within a situation that had gradually become positive for the Catholic Church. The focus was on the development of the 'visible church', whence the emphasis on the need for more economic resource from Propaganda Fide: to consolidate the existing institutions and bring them to the level required by what they considered high Scandinavian standards, but also for the expansion of the church by opening new stations and building churches and chapels.

³⁵ Central Norway 1958, 132.

³⁶ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 117.

³⁷ Ap. Visit. Sweden 1956, 82.

3 Missionary Strategies (and Abilities) in Comparison

Visitor Hanssen's reports, sent to Propaganda Fide in 1957, have been particularly useful for a more precise contextualisation of the history and situation of the Scandinavian missions, since the *relationes* are often synthetic or even absent (northern Norway).

This comparison, however, also brought to light a more problematic reading than that emerged from the *relationes*, when the visitor highlighted deficiencies in those fields considered fundamental for the success of the missionary apostolate.

In the past, a good and diligent priest was sufficient; today, these highly civilised countries required much more from a priest [...] he can't carry on the Catholic Church if he doesn't know the language well and if he's not completely familiar with the culture of the country where he works.³⁸

This kind of observations - concerning the clergy's skills - recurs in each report: contrary to what the bishops and vicars answered to question number 29, Hanssen highlighted significant gaps in the level of knowledge of Scandinavian languages by the missionary clergy, who was still in clear majority compared to the local one.

He was probably aware of the great importance that the Congregation of Propaganda Fide had always given to this aspect: an imperfect spiritual assistance, as well as a superficial comprehension of catechism, were the more obvious consequences.

The visitor's remarks were mostly addressed to male religious congregations. According to Hanssen, the regular clergy had an advantage over the secular one, particularly in these countries, characterised by great distances: cohabitation or frequent contacts, mutual support, the superior's and the province's leadership protected the priests from that isolation (both geographic and spiritual) which often affected the secular clergy. But at the same time this could be an obstacle to the apostolate:

at home they [the regular priests] speak their own language, they don't distance themselves far enough from their education and culture to be able to conform to the country in which they must gain souls to God.³⁹

The priests of the Sacred Heart of the Dutch province [...] the first difficulty they encounter is that of languages: Finnish, which be-

³⁸ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 105-6.

³⁹ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 105.

longs to a group of completely foreign languages, is particularly difficult. As long as they do not speak well the languages of the country, the Finnish Catholic Church remains a foreign church for them.⁴⁰

The average age was another problem that affected the Scandinavian missions. For example, the Redemptorist fathers in Denmark were quite old and conservative, but also the missionaries of the Holy Family who led the Vicariate of Northern Norway or the fathers of the Congregation of Jesus and Mary in central Norway have lost the enthusiasm and the persuasive strength necessary to work successfully among Protestants.⁴¹

Probably, these aspects also affected the missionaries' ability to adapt the Catholic message to the Scandinavian historical-cultural context, pursuing a "special spirituality" characterised by forms and contents "too traditional and not appropriate for the Danish [or Scandinavian in general] character", that is a spirituality more compliant with a Catholic country than with a protestant one. In this sense, the most exemplifying case is that of the Montfort missionaries (Company of Mary) in Denmark: because of their peculiar Marian worship, they conveyed concepts about the Virgin Mary without the "necessary prudence".⁴²

Therefore, the missionary clergy in Scandinavia suffered from a lack of skill and update on several levels, which, according to Hansen, precluded the possibility of – citing a recurring expression in his reports – "being Danish with the Danes", "Finnish with Finns" etc. and essentially the first of the main causes for the stagnation of the apostolate.

Actually, the visitor got also signs of restlessness in this sense: while northern Norway mission, for example, "suffered from the lack of young, zealous and skilled priests",⁴³ in Finland there were "young forces who want to move forward [...] to try always something new, to keep the apostolate alive and thus encourage the priests and the laity". The danger was not laziness but disillusionment and discouragement.

[Missionaries] started their work with youthful enthusiasm. The critical point comes after about ten years, when most of them realise that they will not get more results than their predecessors. The early enthusiasm surrenders to resignation, to discontent with

⁴⁰ Ap. Visit. Finland 1956, 270-1.

⁴¹ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 55.

⁴² Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 112.

⁴³ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 62

themselves and with the others and [...] to criticism of the leadership [i.e. the Vicar], to mutual criticism.⁴⁴

Financial resources, but also impulse and leadership were solicited from the bishop of Oslo too:

The issue is urgent! Otherwise - as a serious and eminent priest wrote - the result is a 'spiritus resignationis, passivitatis, criticae negativae, mutuae suspicionis et detractiois, divisionis et particularismi inter clerum'.⁴⁵

However, according to Hanssen's reports, all the bishops and vicars of Scandinavia were targets of criticism from their own clergy: they were good and paternal people, but weak in leadership (Cobben and Mangers) or dictators (Wember). The eighty-year-old Müller was no longer able to face the problems.

Generally, they were blamed for the little listening given to the priests (who also had few occasions to meet) and, as a consequence, for the lack of understanding of the concrete problems of the missions; also the Danish Suhr, for example, who was highly esteemed ("compared to the other Scandinavian dioceses, the episcopal leadership in Copenhagen works well"),⁴⁶ was blamed for the lack of clear guidelines on very topical issues, such as mixed marriages, marriage morality and *abortus provocatus*.

From the visitor's reports, also based on the opinions gathered among the clergy, what clearly emerges are divergent views about the needs of the Scandinavian missions: contrary to the episcopate, Hanssen rejected the option of increasing the religious institutes, urging instead the intensification of those already existing, a 'qualitative' effort aimed at safeguarding the achieved results and at gaining visibility and influence among public opinion and in particular among intellectuals.

The interest in the Catholic Church is great, where it shows itself *up to date* [originally in English], as e.g., the apostolate of the Dominicans.⁴⁷

In this sense, the Jesuit and Dominican orders were the models to follow: they committed themselves more and with better results in the study of the local language and culture; thanks to their high level of

⁴⁴ Ap. Visit. Finland 1956, 279-80.

⁴⁵ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 21.

⁴⁶ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 99.

⁴⁷ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 52.

preparation, they could provide the missions with the so-called ‘specialised forces’, i.e. educated and trained priests, capable of guaranteeing the impulse for the necessary qualitative consolidation of the mission.

Hanssen’s notes on these religious orders are quite different from those – previously reported – related to male missionary congregations. In Norway, which needed “only priests who surpass mediocrity” and, possibly, exceed the level of preparation of the country’s Protestant priests, the Dominicans were a “bright point” in the diocese of Oslo as in the other missions of Scandinavia. Their apostolate was, according to Hanssen, “directly missionary and at a very high level”:⁴⁸ literary apostolate, lectures for Catholics and non-Catholics, education of converts; moreover, they maintained relations with the intellectuals of the University of Oslo and they managed the Catholic forum, a cycle of weekly lectures on theological and cultural topics.

New ideas, new methods, new forces and new relationships are of essential importance for the progress of the Church in Norway [...] where things go on, but nothing new happened.⁴⁹

For these reasons, Hanssen’s advice was to entrust the eight Dominicans with the training and the updating of the local clergy. Their convent was in fact considered more suitable for the ‘Norwegian initiation’ of the new missionaries (i.e., a period of study during which they were introduced to the language, culture and history of the country from a pastoral point of view) than the bishop’s residence, where this training was considered too superficial.

He suggested also to give them a parish in Oslo: without it, they were a little outside and above the clergy, “a kind of state within the state”;⁵⁰ at the same time, opening new parishes in the largest cities of Norway (Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger) would have contributed not to lose the families who moved to the suburbs. Certainly, this was a “less spectacular” solution than that proposed by Bishop Mangers, that is founding new stations all along the country, but according to Hanssen the results would have been more concrete.

In Helsinki, where they arrived in 1950, the three Dominicans represented “a great benefit”:⁵¹ they had a house with a chapel, a study centre and an open library, which served as a Catholic information point; they also organised lectures and edited the scientific journal *Documenta*. Whence the tensions between the monopoly of the priests

⁴⁸ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 19, 21.

⁴⁹ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 52.

⁵⁰ Ap. Visit. Norway 1956, 22.

⁵¹ Ap. Visit. Finland 1956, 272.

of the Sacred Heart – who, however, were unable to interact with intellectuals (“it is said that the Sacred Heart should not consider itself on the same cultural level as that of the Finnish intellectuals”)⁵² –, and the Dominicans who aspire to widen their range of action.

The Dominicans of the province of Paris, together with the Jesuits of the province of Cologne, were the most active orders in Sweden with very similar services: the parishes, the press apostolate, lectures, ecumenical circles, and the university apostolate (the Jesuits in Uppsala, the Dominicans in Lund).

The need to expand this type of ‘specialised apostolate’, already experienced by these two orders, was the first for importance among the key points of Hanssen’s reports for all the Scandinavian missions. He concluded that an increase in economic resources was certainly necessary, but it had to be allocated primarily to this field, as well as to the training of clergy able to face the challenges represented by these countries.

A strong direction was also necessary for the renewal of missionary work in Scandinavia. Although bishops and vicars had done a lot in the past for the growth of the Catholic Church, they were no longer able (with the sole exception of Wember) – due to age, character or health reasons – to guide their clergy with the necessary firmness towards well-defined objectives.

Consequently, in addition to the options already mentioned (for example, to entrust the Jesuits and Dominicans with more initiatives, even to the detriment of the other male religious congregations), Hanssen suggested the retirement of some bishops on the first useful occasion.

4 Conclusions

The analysis of the *relationes* together with that of the reports of the apostolic visitor Mons. Antoon Hanssen gives a quite exhaustive picture of the Catholic missions in Scandinavia in the 1950s. In contrast to the rather telegraphic *relationes*, the reports have provided important details for a more precise contextualisation, but also an alternative point of view that has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the Catholic missionary work.

Simplifying, the apostolic visitor showed another side of this reality: while the episcopate attributed the slow progress of Catholicism in Scandinavia to economic difficulties (even if undeniable) and to a deep-rooted anti-Catholic prejudice that survived in the common conscience despite religious freedom (which, however, was only gradually and quite lately sanctioned), Hanssen highlighted the deficiencies

⁵² Ap. Visit. Finland 1956, 276.

(rather serious, when related to the knowledge of the local language) of a part of the missionary clergy.

This level of civilisation imposes methods and means different from those used among peoples of inferior civilisation.

This sentence, extracted from the previously mentioned letter by Father Goovart, summarises a common opinion that also emerges from other letters addressed to Propaganda Fide in those years: the Scandinavian countries represented a special testbed, which demanded a specialisation of the missionary effort, whence the objective difficulties of the clergy and the consequent slow progress of the Catholic Church in terms of conversions, local vocations etc.

This could also have been a plausible reason for Propaganda Fide to organise the apostolic visit in 1956.

The question is spontaneous: why did bishops and vicars omit such significant aspects in their *relationes*? The first consideration concerns the type of source: perhaps the 1922 questionnaire, as well as the *Prospectus status missionis*, were too rigid instruments, calibrated on the needs of different missionary contexts, to allow such particular dynamics to emerge.

Paradoxically, in these European missions the challenge was represented by a similar cultural, religious and theological context, which excluded the traditional superior-inferior relationship. While in non-European territories Catholicism's ability to penetrate was first due to the remarkable difference that the mission could make in terms of social development (education, health care, etc.), in the Scandinavian countries there was no possibility to make the difference in an already advanced welfare state, thus the penetration of Catholicism suffered from greater obstacles.

At the same time, the visitor's reports must be read with some caution for two reasons. First, there is the possibility that the missionaries have considered the visit a way through which convey their discontent directly to the Holy See, perhaps even at the cost of exacerbating certain problems (see the quite bad portraits of some bishops). Second, the visitor may have focused on certain aspects of the missionary apostolate (knowledge of the local language, the ordination of local clergy, etc.) stressing their deficiencies, following precisely the instructions of Propaganda Fide.

Understandably, bishops and vicars could have voluntarily omitted the critical issues they were aware of but that they could not manage: geographical distances made contacts (and control) with their clergy difficult; but from Hanssen's reports what emerges is also a sense of bishops' powerlessness facing religious orders and congregations that really enjoyed great autonomy, therefore free to persevere in more or less successful missionary practices.

The Catholic Church must always examine and re-examine its methods of spreading the faith. Not only the method, but also the content of the preaching must be considered against the background of the time and the country in which Christianity has to be introduced. [...] It is not a question of minimising the content of the faith, but of spreading it in its essence, well balanced in its entirety and in its details (Bonduelle O.P., *Essai sur la situation religieuse en Finlande*).

[...] Not all priests have the time to do it and the skills required. Unfortunately, as they say, everyone still follows their own way a little too much.⁵³

On the other hand, as this quote points out, a part of the clergy (and some congregations in particular) was really unable to understand the deficiencies of the missionary strategies, and consequently the need for a rethink, an ‘update’. It did not seem to understand the different challenges represented by the Scandinavian missions for the Catholic forces: not only to convert and expand the Church according to the ecclesiocentric concept of *plantatio ecclesiae*, but also the need for a cultural adaptation of the Gospel, the so-called ‘inculturation’ as theorised by Second Vatican Council, even in an already Christian and European context.

He [Suhr] is purely Danish; he wants to be Danish with the Danes and [...] he only approves what he considers appropriate for the Danes and what they feel as Danish. Those who, like the German Jesuits and the French Dominicans, think forward, agree with him on this point.⁵⁴

In conclusion, as previously anticipated, from an overall analysis of the sources, what emerges is a latent contrast between two different approaches: one ‘conservative’, tied to traditional missionary practices, calibrated on non-Christian realities (as emerges from the vocabulary used), and to the intransigent anti-Protestant controversy; whence the tendency to ascribe the slow progress of Catholicism to some leitmotifs such as the availability of financial resources and the growing religious indifferentism as a consequence of a long chain of errors that had its origin in the Reformation.

The other approach instead was more oriented towards an ‘update’, as an effort to master the local language and culture to the advantage of an effective apostolate, with a consequence emphasis on the need to improve the quality of the missionary commitment, also

⁵³ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 135.

⁵⁴ Ap. Visit. Denmark 1956, 97.

in terms of the clergy's competence, while less disposed to consider the issue in terms of doctrinal superiority or of conversion to the 'true' church. The challenge was to respond to the growing phenomenon of religious indifferentism, not as a mere consequence of Protestant neo-paganism, but as an aspect of modernity and of the consequent transformation of Western society, according to the warning given (not surprisingly) by the Jesuits some years later: "Europe: a land of mission!"⁵⁵

Although this approach had an undoubted influence on the Second Vatican Council both in the missionary sphere and in that of relations with other Christian churches, the Catholic Church in Scandinavia is still a minority, and some difficulties have not been overcome.⁵⁶

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⁵⁵ Forno, *La cultura degli altri*, 159.

⁵⁶ Pope Benedict XVI (2010). *Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Bishops of the Scandinavian Bishops Conference on their 'ad limina' visit*. https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100325_scandinavia.html.

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