

# Notes about the Uses of the *relationes ad limina* Produced During the Pontificate of Pius XII

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**Abstract** The value of *ad limina relationes* as source documents has been widely enhanced by historiographical research. These sources are capable of returning valuable information about the life of the diocese as well as the biography of the bishops who compiled it. The *relationes* compiled between 1945 and 1958 have the ability to offer valuable information on an ecclesial situation marked by the theme of reconstruction: not only material, but also in the sense of a redefinition of the core values of the society. In this way, through the *relationes*, it is possible to ascertain how the great slogans and the great ideas of the pontificate of Pius XII have actually been received locally.

**Keywords** Pius XII. *Relationes ad limina*. Roman Catholic church. Roman Curia. Dioceses. Morality. Politics. Papacy.

**Summary** 1 The Origin. – 2 The Test Case of the Pontificate of Pius XII. – 3 The *relationes* as Sources.



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## 1 The Origin

It is almost impossible to reckon how many times the scholars who have used the *relationes ad limina* - sometimes editing the text in its entirety - have extolled the extraordinary informative value represented by this kind of historical source. If this consideration has an undoubted foundation, up to the point of becoming obvious, nevertheless the use of *relationes* for research purposes constantly imposes on the scholar a full awareness of the origin and of the purposes assigned to this informative tool over the centuries.<sup>1</sup> Firstly, by noting the historical origins of this source, that certainly has received a fundamental impulse from the Council of Trent, but which has its roots in the fourth century. The practice of the visit *ad limina* originated from the obligation that the suffragan bishops had to take part in the synod that every year was celebrated in the metropolitan see:<sup>2</sup> from there a constant and irreversible process has led to a practice that, extending the local obligations, has induced the bishops to establish a peculiar relationship with the bishop of Rome. The important evolutions that had occurred since the age of Constantine had placed the bishop of Rome in a position of particular authority, strengthened by the increasingly frequent visits made by the bishops to the tombs of the apostles preserved in the city: in fact, these visits became the immediate opportunity to brief the bishop of Rome on what had happened in the local churches and to receive from him, if necessary, useful advice; but it is also clear that this practice became increasingly necessary and binding as soon as Christianity had developed from a localised and restricted movement into a widespread phenomenon, that had received important guarantees from the imperial authority and that, above all, had by now matured a consciousness of itself as of a reality bound by a sense of communion and that consequently felt the need to express itself through a uniformity of doctrines and practices.

The sources we have speak eloquently of this mutation of accent: the opportunity to visit Rome had gradually become a necessity and the visit was no longer a simple option, but an obligation regulated by increasingly precise rules. The letter that the Synod of Sardica of 342-343 had sent to Pope Julius revealed, twenty years after the Nicene Council, how much the bishops considered it of the utmost importance to update the bishop of Rome on what was happening in their dioceses.<sup>3</sup> Then in 447 Pope Leo, in a letter addressed to

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Carrol, *The Bishop's Quinquennial Report*; Càrcel Ortí, "La visita 'ad limina apóstolorum Petri et Pauli'"; Càrcel Ortí, Càrcel Ortí, *Historia, Derecho y Diplomática*; Ricciardi Celsi, *Le relationes ad limina*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sägmüller, "Die Visitatio liminum".

<sup>3</sup> Synodi Sardicensis, "Epistola ad Julium".

the bishops of Sicily, prescribed that three of them were required to come on 29 September of each year to Rome to attend the synod that the pope would convoke on the anniversary of his election.<sup>4</sup> Gregory the Great established, with respect to this latter case, that the visit of the bishops, instead of every three years, should happen every five years.<sup>5</sup> Michele Maccarrone observed that acting in this way,

It was thus created between the pope and the bishops of his province (that extended from the Apennines to Sicily) a completely new and unique relationship in the canonical order of the Church, which was based on the same root of the jurisdiction of the Bishop of Rome, because they came to his seat to venerate the Apostle of whom he was the vicar and whose succession continued, in a conceptual and religious identification between *sedes apostolica* and *limina apostolorum*.<sup>6</sup>

Two centuries later, the Roman Synod of June 743, presided over by Pope Zacharias, decreed that the bishops ordained in Rome should go to the *Urbe* on 15 May each year to make their visit *ad limina apostolorum*: and if the distance from Rome did not allow it, they could replace their visit by sending a written report;<sup>7</sup> for all the other bishops were instead the rules agreed at the time of ordination to define specifically the respective obligations.

When the Gregorian Reform (or rather Revolution) affirmed the principle of *Libertas Ecclesiae*, the visits became a valuable tool for a papacy that, facing the break with the East and the dialectic that had opened with the imperial power, aspired to enshrine its centrality in the Church as well as in society. One therefore understands the very particular insistence that Gregory VII dedicated to the obligation of the visit, thus binding also the conferral of the pallium to the obligation of the latter's fulfilment. And it is precisely in one of his Roman synods, the one celebrated in 1079, that a formula of oath was also defined that bound the newly appointed bishops to the ob-

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Leo I, "(192) Universos episcopos per Siciliam constitutos".

<sup>5</sup> Pope Gregory to the deacon Cyprian, May 597, in Gregorio Magno, *Lettere (IV-VII)*, 447. Gregory the Great also established that the visit took place on the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.

<sup>6</sup> Maccarrone, "Ubi est papa, ibi est Roma", 372: "si creava così tra il papa ed vescovi della sua provincia (che si estendeva dagli Appennini alla Sicilia) un rapporto del tutto nuovo e singolare nell'ordinamento canonico della Chiesa, che traeva motivo dalla medesima radice della giurisdizione del vescovo di Roma, perché si veniva alla sua sede per venerare l'Apostolo di cui era il vicario e del quale continuava la successione, in una identificazione concettuale e religiosa tra *sedes apostolica* e *limina apostolorum*". Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

<sup>7</sup> Boncompagni, "Roma (Romanum), Concilio di", 193.

servance of the obligation of the visit.<sup>8</sup> By the end of the first millennium of the Christian era it was clear for all the people that the ancient practice of the visit carried out as a spontaneous and optional act of devotion to the Apostles Peter and Paul had only remained the outer shell: the *ad limina* visit now primarily aimed at the meeting with the pope and the reporting of the life of the dioceses and had become a part of the duties that qualified the bishops as such. This development became even more evident when Pope Paschal II (1099-1118) replied to the archbishop-elect of Split in Dalmatia – who was objecting to the request to swear to the obligation of the visit – that this was a “common obligation” so that it was fulfilled even by the bishops who lived in the most distant regions of central and northern Europe, if not directly then at least through delegates.<sup>9</sup>

Between the twelfth and fifteenth century the tightening of the norms relating to the visit also determined an evolution in the way of its fulfilment by the bishops. When the *ad limina* visit ceased to be an act of religious devotion and became the accomplishment of an administrative practice, the bishops also realised that their direct point of contact had changed. It was no longer the pope, the successor of Peter, but the bureaucratic apparatus that assisted him in the government of the Church. And it was Ugucione of Pisa, in a passage of his *Summa* on the *Decretum*, who effectively described the evolution of the purpose of the visit: the tombs of the Apostles were no longer even identifiable in a place, but in a metaphysical space circumscribed by the presence of the Roman Curia: “*Liminibus: idem intelligo si curie romane, ubicumque sit*”.<sup>10</sup> And when shortly later Innocent IV struggled with the problem of legitimising his status as a pope who had momentarily moved together with his Curia to Lyons, he reaffirmed that “*limina ibi esse intelliguntur ubi papa est*”.<sup>11</sup> The Roman Curia tightened the control over the bishops which led to an increase in episcopal attempts to evade the obligations of the visit by requesting – and in many cases receiving – a dispensation allowing the obligation of the visit to be fulfilled by sending a written report. However, this practice spread so uncontrollably that in 1257 Pope Alexander IV decided to revoke all the derogations granted so far, restoring the ancient practice of the annual visit made by the bishop himself.<sup>12</sup> The pre-emptory nature of the directives of the pontiffs was eloquent of the difficulty of the practice of the visit, that bishops preferred to replace by send-

<sup>8</sup> “Apostolorum limina singulis annis aut per me aut per certum nuncium meum visitabo, nisi eorum absolvar licentia”, *Liber Extra*, X 2.24.4, *Corpus iuris canonici*, col. 360.

<sup>9</sup> Congregazione per i vescovi, *Direttorio per la visita 'ad limina'*, 671.

<sup>10</sup> Maccarrone, “Ubi est papa, ibi est Roma”, 376.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Melloni, *Innocenzo IV*, 81.

<sup>12</sup> Manselli, “Alessandro IV, papa”.

ing a written report. The centuries immediately preceding the Council of Trent were in fact those in which the practice of the visit seemed to disappear.<sup>13</sup> Thus in 1540 some bishops addressed Pope Paul III to ask for a definitive exemption from the visit, resorting to the argument that it caused damage to the pastoral care by demanding an absence from the diocese:<sup>14</sup> a kind of reasoning that, as it is easy to imagine, was likely to impress the pontiff who only a few years before had encouraged the drafting of the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*. At the Council of Trent there was an attempt to repeat these petitions, but they were not heard. A line was clearly drawn: for a church that was marching in the direction of a deep reorganisation of its structures and that aspired to the definition of a Roman model to be applied universally, it was urgent for the bishops to maintain constant and systematic relations with the bishop of Rome and his Curia.<sup>15</sup> With the bull *Romanus Pontifex* of 20 December 1587, Pope Sixtus V fixed the norms relating to the visit, explaining his intention to restore what had been established in ancient times and scrupulously observed for many centuries. The episcopate was bound by an oath to the fulfilment of the *ad limina* visit within the terms established by the Apostolic See, which could change from three to five years, depending on the distance of the diocese from Rome; the report that would accompany the visit should give informations on the state of the local Church and on the material and spiritual conditions of the clergy and people of the diocese; it was also foreseen that, in case of impediment, the report would be forwarded through a delegate of the bishop: but it had to be clear to everyone that all these exceptions had to be duly documented. In the constitution *Immensa aeterni Dei* of 1588, Pope Sixtus established that it would be the congregation of the Council to watch over the respect of this obligation by the bishops and to study and store the reports that would have been sent to Rome.

Once restored the practice of the visit, the new question was to establish the exact quality of the informations to be transmitted to Rome using the *relationes*. Pope Sixtus had given no indication in this regard and even if some more diligent bishop, as Charles Borromeo, had been careful to define a spectrum of informations appropriate to Roman expectations, the average reporting quality was overall un-

**13** Ottavio Cavalleri (“Visite pastorali”, 101) states in this regard that “the ancient custom of visiting the sacred limini had almost ceased at the beginning of the sixteenth century” (“la consuetudine antichissima di visitare i sacri limini era pressoché cessata agli inizi del Cinquecento”).

**14** Pater, *Die Bischöfliche Visitatio*, 85.

**15** “The *ad limina* visits will prove to be a very effective instrument of homogenization of the episcopal body and of Roman centralization” (“Le visite *ad limina* si riveleranno uno strumento molto efficace di omogeneizzazione del corpo episcopale e di centralizzazione romana”) (Venard, “Il concilio Lateranense V e il Tridentino”, 363).

satisfactory.<sup>16</sup> Through subsequent focuses it was therefore foreseen that the report would be divided into two parts: the first one was to deal with the ‘material’ state of the diocese, offering quantitative information about existing churches and oratories, monasteries, pawnshops, hospitals and fraternities; the second one had to be dedicated to the ‘formal’ state, focusing on the pastoral dimension and giving news on the adaptation of the diocesan reality to the *decreta* of the Tridentine, with respect to the celebration of the diocesan and provincial synod, the conclusion of the pastoral visit and to institution of the seminary; this second section should also offer information about the respect of the obligation of residence by the bishop<sup>17</sup> and the work undertaken in order to fight the spread of heresies. However, in most cases the *relationes* were evasive and many bishops, in spite of the advice given in large part of the treatises on the episcopal office, were limited to an act of homage and greeting to the pontiff. Benedict XI-II tried to remedy this situation by presenting a detailed questionnaire in 1725, especially for the so-called ‘formal’ aspect, which also left room for bishops to report on topics outside the official grid of questions.<sup>18</sup> Even more decisive was the intervention of Pope Benedict XIV, to whose methodical mind it had not escaped that the great part of the *relationes* that reached Rome were abundant as to “superfluis” and “deficientes in necessariis”.<sup>19</sup> Pope Lambertini insisted on the importance of the duty of compiling the *relationes* in the treatise *de Synodo dioeclesana* of 1748<sup>20</sup> and redefined the terms of delivery, specifying that the bishops of the Italian Peninsula and of the adjacent islands would have to send it every three years, while for the other bishops there was a five-year deadline. And in order to be more confident of the fulfilment of this obligation, in 1740 Benedict XIV had decided that from that moment the *relationes* should be examined by the congregation on the State of the Churches (the so called ‘Concilietto’), a light structure that had to interact more frequently with the pope, and whose members – as well as the prefect and the secretary – came from the same congregation of the Council. The ‘Concilietto’ enlisted also the help of the Secretary of the Latin Letters, who was entrusted with the task – once the analysis of the *relationes* had been completed – of drafting the roman answers for the bishops. The radical changes that occurred in decades following the French Revolution and the drastic spending review imposed by Napoleon on ec-

**16** For an initial assessment of the decisions taken by Pope Sixtus see Robres Lluch, Castell Maiques, “La visita ‘ad limina’”.

**17** See now Wiesner, *Tridentinisches Papsttum*.

**18** Turchini, “Visite ad limina”, 614.

**19** “Instructio Sacrae Congregationis Concilii”, 665.

**20** For this particular aspect, see Fattori, “Acciò i vescovi latini”.

clesiastical institutions highlighted how the structure of the questionnaire for the *relationes* needed an adjustment. This question was also raised at the Vatican Council of 1869-70, but its sudden interruption prevented it from reforming the existing legislation.<sup>21</sup>

Only with the curial reform of Pius X in 1908 a revision of the norms relating to *ad limina* visits was enacted. The entire handling of this topic was transferred from the Congregation of the Council (and of the ‘Concilietto’) to the Consistorial Congregation, which was destined to play a leading role in the Curia of Pius X.<sup>22</sup> With the decree *De relationibus dioecesanis et visitatione SS. Liminum*, addressed in 1909 “to all Ordinaries not subject to the Sacred congregation of propaganda fide”, the Consistorial Congregation established that the *ad limina* visit was obligatory for all bishops every five years from 1 January 1911. Attached to this decree was an *Ordo servandus in relatione de statu ecclesiarum* which developed in 150 points the themes that the reports should deal with.<sup>23</sup> The *Codex iuris canonici* of 1917 sanctioned these new rules in canons 340-342, making clear that the presentation of the report was one of the fundamental obligations of the bishop as defined by the Council of Trent: specifically the drafting and sending of the report was to be considered more important than the visit of the tombs of the Apostles. In 1918 the Consistorial Congregation realised a new questionnaire, divided into 100 points;<sup>24</sup> in 1922 was added a version structured in 90 points for the Churches that fell within the competence of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide;<sup>25</sup> these last acts defined the legal boundaries within which the bishops would prepare their reports during the pontificate of Pius XII.

## 2 The Test Case of the Pontificate of Pius XII

The sample of reports considered here offers the possibility for some general considerations, both under the aspect of national representation, and of the particular perspective of the authors, who were not only engaged as diocesan ordinaries.<sup>26</sup> The first concerns the

<sup>21</sup> Congregazione per i vescovi, *Direttorio per la visita ‘ad limina’*, 675.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Vian, “Convergenze e divergenze”.

<sup>23</sup> Congregatio Consistorialis, “De relationibus dioecesanis et visitatione”. It should be remembered that, in addition to this, Pius X had also prescribed also to the bishops the sending of detailed reports dedicated to reporting on what was done to contain the modernist threat: Diegues, “Tra competenze e procedure”.

<sup>24</sup> Congregatio Consistorialis, “De relationibus dioecesanis”.

<sup>25</sup> Congregatio De Propaganda Fide, “De relationibus missionum”.

<sup>26</sup> I am referring here to the reports presented during the seminar held at Ca’ Foscari on 1 June 2022, dedicated to *The Church of Pius XII after the Second World War (1945-1958): the ad limina relationes as sources of historiographical reflection*; in this seminar

external configuration of this documentary material determined by the questionnaire, which had been introduced to counter reports that were evasive and verbose on less sensitive topics that were not of particular relevance for the Roman See. The questionnaire addressed the need for a classification of the information in order to facilitate subsequent Roman control. But no less important was the need to produce, through answers determined by particular questions, an image of the Church that was as uniform as possible everywhere, according to a need that from the Council of Trent onwards was seen as indispensable. The same problem arose when the consultation of the episcopate was launched during the pre-preparatory phase of Vatican II: in this case, however, it was John XXIII himself who decided to deviate from the curial rule and to abandon the questionnaire in favor of an open consultation. It goes without saying that when *relationes* are produced in such different contexts - to mention only the difference between the Spanish and the Scandinavian case - all the impracticability of a uniform approach emerges. So the only truly common element is given by the length of these texts, determined precisely by the extension of the questionnaires employed. Even with respect to the language - the legislation required strictly Latin - there are some interesting exceptions, as in the French case: here we are in fact in the presence of bishops who are real national monuments, after years of resistance to the Nazi occupation, and who choose *motu proprio* the national language, and do so without any embarrassment, for the compilation of the *relatio*. Still with respect to a more external dimension, it is possible to observe that in some cases the sample considered is numerically reduced, as for the *relationes* coming from the Patriarchate of Venice; in other cases, such as for the Yugoslav one, the reduction is induced by compulsion: the bishops had rare and infrequent communications with Rome, and the State authorities did not allow them to leave the national territory. But also in this case we ascertain the truth of what Delio Cantimori, later quoted by Giovanni Miccoli, said about the relevance of

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have spoken: Carlo Urbani, "Riverire e riferire? Temi e problemi dalle *relationes ad limina* per un profilo dell'episcopato italiano nel secondo dopoguerra"; Patrizia Luciani, "Il 'progressismus gallicum' nelle *relationes ad limina* francesi e belghe fra 1947 e 1957"; Enrico Baruzzo, "Tra desideri di restaurazione cattolica e segnali di secolarizzazione: la Spagna degli anni Quaranta e Cinquanta vista attraverso le *relationes ad limina* di alcuni vescovi iberici"; Daiana Menti, "Le missioni cattoliche in Scandinavia: un bilancio nelle *relationes ad limina* a Propaganda Fide (1948-1958)"; Ivan Portelli, "Tra repressione e difesa: la situazione della Chiesa cattolica nella Jugoslavia comunista dalle *relationes ad limina* (1946-1958)"; Francesco Tacchi, "Le *relationes ad limina* dei vescovi tedeschi: i problemi della ricostruzione e l'avvento della società del benessere (1948-1958)"; Saretta Marotta, "Le tracce della questione ecumenica nelle *relationes ad limina* dei vescovi tedeschi (1948-1958)"; Valentina Ciciliot, "La chiesa cattolica statunitense nel secondo dopoguerra: lo sguardo delle *relationes ad limina* (1949-1954)".



the 'glimpse' as a useful perspective to focus on broader and complex scenarios.<sup>27</sup> One last consideration, always linked to a more external perspective, concerns the periodisation. If choosing the period of time between the end of the Second World War and the end of the pontificate of Pius XII has some plausibility, it is also evident that it is a model that does not fit all sizes: just think of the Spanish case, where clearly the most effective periodisation is quite different from the one that suits the countries directly affected by the War.

With regard to the content of the reports, it is possible to isolate at least some major common topics. First and foremost it is interesting to record how all the *relationes* certify the elimination of modernism: the great 'adversary' of the early twentieth century had therefore finally been eradicated, to the point that there was really little to say beyond this. So the great question that arose after the end of the War was the 'rebuilding'. And for many bishops this reconstruction is necessary as much on a material as on a moral level. There are prelates who propose a reconstruction that proceeds from different premises than in the past, in order to be more effective. But, as regards to the Italian case - and not only this one -, a reader of the *relationes* could easily get the impression that the Catholic Church was coming out of the War more or less as it had entered into it: strenuously defending private property, seeking and gaining the support of the small and medium bourgeoisie and adopting a paternalistic attitude that has the taste, above all, of self-sufficiency in front of its responsibilities in the political developments of previous years. Even for Spain, which in other aspects is so different in comparison to the sample considered, the theme of rebuilding is treated both from a material and on a more spiritual level. The Civil War had left deep wounds to which was added an economic situation that required the episcopate to pay particular attention to social emergencies, ranging from lack of housing to a more widespread impoverishment of large sections of society. While on a theoretical level it was proposed to find the solutions to these problems by deepening the elements of the social doctrine of the Church, on a more practical level the bishops pointed to the intensification of charitable activity, e.g., through the Conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul. But the Spanish bishops also reported what they did with respect to the procurement of housing, the distribution of medicines and the establishment of professional laboratories. The Yugoslav bishops, however, were precluded from this concept of rebuilding: their dioceses were in the practical impossibility, due to statal requisitions, to repair the buildings damaged by the war. The Scandinavian and American cases are even more different. Scandinavia belonged to the territories under the ju-

<sup>27</sup> Battelli, "In difesa della storia", 374.

risdiction of the Propaganda Fide, but it is clear that it was a missionary territory with characteristics very different from the other regions subject to this congregation: in a region that was characterised by welfare states, it is clear that, with regard to rebuilding, a small Catholic Church could not offer anything attractive. The same can be affirmed for the United States in which Catholicism did not constitute a small minority as in Scandinavia, but which differently from Europe had not known the ravages of war on their territory. American bishops thus defined the task of the rebuilding as a reconstruction of the Christian culture, that was essential to counter both secularism and communism.

The *relationes* provided also informations on the reality of the parishes, the pivot around which the entire functioning of the local Churches revolved. The bishops remarked on the foundation of new parishes, suggesting that this demonstrated the social relevance that the Church had acquired. In the United States, where Catholicism was experiencing a significant growth, the reflections about the parishes were combined with the request for an adequate recognition of the importance of Catholic schools: according to the bishops this ancient matter was now managed with less hostility by the Government than in the past. Surprisingly the triumphalistic tones adopted by some bishops are not found in the Spanish *relationes*: in this case, the bishops showed a certain awareness that behind the apparent solidity of the parishes there was only a certain sluggish persistence of Catholic worship. In the Scandinavian countries, the perspective was naturally different: the questionnaire led in fact to a sort of frustration for some bishops that were asked to enlist schools, educational structures and parish associations. These prelates could do very little in a situation where Catholicism had few personnel – Jesuits will be banned until 1956 – and means. Yet, in spite of this situation, many bishops did not resize their ambitions: some of them pursued ephemeral dreams of conquest and expansion and others, more realistically, aimed above all to strengthen the existing structures. The evaluations on the parishes were then intertwined with those on the associations, which meant reporting almost exclusively on Catholic Action (with the exception of Yugoslavia, where it was forbidden, and Spain, where, alongside Catholic Action, the role of confraternities and third orders was valued). Both in Spain and Italy the bishops were giving detailed informations about the associative structures derived from Catholic Action, presenting them as suitable tools to involve the laity in the most different professional conditions. The analysis of the parish situation also included reporting on the frequency of the sacraments, one of the legacies of the ancient practice of pastoral visits following the Council of Trent. It is interesting to observe that in this case the bishops intertwined the data with sociological considerations, because they believed that only a complex

analysis would be able to find the most suitable solutions to the problems that were emerging in contexts where urbanisation had become a phenomenon that involved the Catholic community more and more.

With respect to the clergy the *relationes* insisted on the permanent validity of the Tridentine model, but also posed the question of developing a training method capable of reacting to novelties: this meant, among other things, planning a training that was no longer exclusively humanistic, but also open to new disciplines. The *relationes* then provided information on the changes and experiments that some bishops intended to promote in order to have a clergy more suited to the challenges of society. So, just staying on the French case, if it is clear that the events of the Mission de France and the Mission de Paris were widely reported with a certain pride by Cardinal Liénart, it is no less interesting to record the effervescence of the new forms of consecrated life, almost all defined by a strong social emphasis (think of the Petites Sœurs de Jésus or the Prado). These were initiatives that pushed for a greater involvement of the Church in new social realities: but precisely because they had arisen in the periphery, it was also possible to observe the caution adopted by Rome towards them. Downstream of formation and experimentations there was the question of the numerical size of the clergy, often described by bishops as too small compared to pastoral needs. Needless to say that any quantitative consideration had to be related to the actual number of faithful of the respective territories and that the small numbers of Scandinavia had, in this sense, a very different weight if proportioned to other nations. In Spain, for example, the bishops affirmed the urgency of strengthening a clergy reduced by the killings of the civil war and by the difficulties encountered by seminaries; the bishops of Yugoslavia - who also had the problem of homogenising a clergy who spoke different languages - complained about the problems posed by the government authorities to the training process of the clergy, which was nevertheless allowed. Many more problems stemmed from the question - typical of communist countries - of the adhesion of priests to the associations of the clergy which were promoted by the authorities and discouraged by the episcopate. In Scandinavia, however, it was above all the conflict that existed between the secular clergy and the clergy from religious orders that constituted a problem.

Under the chapter of *morality* the *relationes* summarised the concerns of the bishops for the difficulties encountered by Catholicism in a context in which the hegemonic position maintained for centuries was replaced by a dynamic of secularisation that was getting harder to contain. For some bishops, heralds of a season in which the Church was confident and free of uncertainties, the crisis could only arise from a lack of commitment; but for almost all the other bishops the problems were there and they were openly named: secularism, the

decadence of morals, widespread immorality, divorce, abortion (in Spain the ‘problem’ of homosexuality was also mentioned); and considerations often emerged from the *relationes* as to how these phenomena were more widespread in an urban rather than rural context. In Yugoslavia the bishops preferred the shortcut of blaming these problems on the effects of atheist propaganda, while in Spain the short-circuit communism-secularisation was avoided: in this country it was found rather that the growth of religious indifference went hand in hand with the improvement of economic conditions. In Italy, concerns were directed at the presence of the Allied troops and what could be derived from a moral point of view:<sup>28</sup> the widespread anguish among the bishops for the “ballomania” (dancing madness) was precisely one of the manifestations of this care; at the same time the spread of the cinemas was seen as worrying: and in fact priests who instead used it systematically were often branded as “progressives”; on the contrary, in the United States – with the great example of Fulton Sheen<sup>29</sup> – great openness was shown towards the mass media as tools to convey the Catholic message more quickly and widely. In Spain too were expressed concerns about tourism as an agent liable to introduce elements of decadence of morals: these fears had turned – once again – to cinema as well as to foreign literature, who were accused of promoting lifestyles dissonant from those advocated by the national Catholic model of Spain. The case of Scandinavia was quite different: in this region the secularisation was such a deep-rooted process that it did not even merit the elaboration of a strategy of opposition or containment; the most important thing was to protect the Catholic minority from the offensive of non-Catholics.

With regard to politics, the reports generally confirmed concerns about the spread of communism: in this case the bishops supported without problems a questionnaire that let emerge in several passages a strong anti-communist prejudicial. Then some bishops evoked the War as a moment in which the anti-communist commitment had

**28** It was expressive of this concern, translated however on an ecclesial level, what, in November 1946, had taken over the Christian Democrat deputy Giuseppe Dossetti, who in a confidential meeting had manifested a “certain discomfort in thinking that American Catholicity can soon acquire on the whole body of the Church an influence proportionate to the material means at its disposal and the organisational dynamism it can demonstrate, but not equally proportionate to his contemplative effort [...] in short, I fear a little his superficiality, his optimism, the habit itself to an excessive ease of life” (“un certo disagio nel pensare che la *cattolicità americana* possa entro breve tempo acquistare sull’intero corpo della Chiesa una influenza proporzionata ai mezzi materiali di cui può disporre e al dinamismo organizzativo di cui può dare prova, ma non altrettanto proporzionata al suo sforzo contemplativo [...] insomma temo un po’ la sua superficialità, il suo ottimismo, l’abitudine stessa a una eccessiva facilità di vita”) (Pombeni, “Alle origini della proposta culturale”, 262-3).

**29** Cf. Ruozi, “The Arrival of Television”.

been dangerously relaxed. It should be noted, however, that the Italian bishops, unlike their German counterparts, abstained from any kind of reflection on the twenty years of fascist dictatorship. *Relationes* coming from Spain emphasised the defeat or reduction of the great opponents of Catholicism (freemasonry, liberalism and socialism); but it is certainly much more interesting to note that Spanish bishops also mentioned the existence of spaces for reflection and socialization that would be fundamental for the approach of Spain to democracy. And while elsewhere members of the Catholic Action were prevented from acting directly in the political sphere, in Spain, since 1945, some members of Catholic Action had been involved in the government and were decisive for initiating the process that would lead to the conclusion of the Concordat of 1953. It is clear that the case of Yugoslavia presented exactly the opposite: here the *relationes* are of particular interest for their ability to reconstruct a more complex situation, often hidden by the story of cardinal Stepinac: the Yugoslav Church was in fact committed to finding a *modus vivendi* with respect to the communist regime and do this while taking into account different linguistic affiliations, different jurisdictions (some dioceses were still under the control of Propaganda Fide) and an absolutely differentiated presence on the territory; it was therefore a Church committed to facing the prohibition of worship (including singing) and requisitioning of immovable property; to these problems were added the difficulties of relations with Orthodoxy and Islam.

### 3 The *relationes* as Sources

The decisions following the Council of Trent about the sending of *relationes ad limina*, especially after the definition of a binding questionnaire on all matters, has led to the accumulation of an enormous documentary material already extensively scanned and evaluated by historians.<sup>30</sup> The work carried out so far has made it clear that the *relationes* have been useful first of all to know the story of the bishops, to reconstruct their biography and to ascertain how they have fulfilled their pastoral service. They are therefore necessary to reconstruct the history of the dioceses and represent a seismograph that, with a sufficiently frequent frequency, has allowed us to appreciate how the fault lines of the local Churches have moved over the centu-

<sup>30</sup> Here, I recall just Tacchella, *Il cattolicesimo in Albania*; Pagano, Castaldo, “Le visite *ad limina apostolorum*”; Conzemius, *Die Berichte “ad limina”*; Camus Ibacache, “La visita *ad limina*”; Billanovich, “Le ‘*relationes ad limina*’ di Gregorio Barbarigo”; Caridi, “Chiesa e società nella diocesi di Santa Severina”; Barrado Barquilla, “Las visitas *ad limina* del Obispo”; Le “*relationes ad limina*” dei vescovi di Trento; *Les chemins de Rome*; *Le visite “ad Limina Apostolorum” dei vescovi di Bergamo*.

ries. The *relationes* are also important to clarify if and how a certain model of Church and bishop as they were designed by the Council of Trent, have been effectively implemented at the local level: because even in the time of Pius XII this was undoubtedly the model of reference. The vast amount of *relationes* that has accumulated over time represents a historiographical challenge that can be faced today in a different way from the past. What was previously determined by the constraints of print production can be fundamentally rethought in the era of databases: from this point of view the project coordinated by Hubert Wolf concerning the digital edition of the reports of the Nuncio Pacelli could be a reference model for an increasingly extensive sampling of *relationes*.<sup>31</sup>

Another issue concerns the periodisation to be followed in the analysis of the *relationes*. The opening of the Vatican Apostolic Archives according to the duration of the pontificates leads spontaneously to give, at least concerning the *terminus ad quem*, precise boundaries to such samples. But the concentration on a pontificate must be combined with the awareness of its specific problems. Although there is no doubt that the episcopate is (always) more or less receptive to the guidelines of a pontificate (at least formally under the aspect of its great slogans, as emerges from the production of pastoral letters),<sup>32</sup> at the same time it is clear that there are other deeper dynamics, that escape the constraints determined by the *desiderata* of a pontiff. So as well in the history of dioceses as within the Roman Curia it is possible to observe a dialectic and resistance, sometimes very persistent, compared to the line drawn by a single pope. For this reason it is also necessary to consider carefully whether the *relationes* reflect exactly the requests posed by the questionnaire or if they deviate – and in which dimension – from it.

Since they are a source which has already been extensively examined in historical terms, the *ad limina relationes* have been the object of several evaluations. After the first opening of the Vatican Secret Archives these source documents were the subject of an interesting debate between Joseph Schmidlin and Johann Loserth: while Schmidlin stressed the importance of *relationes* as sources for the reconstruction of German history, Loserth expressed a fundamental disagreement, judging that the official nature of this source undermined its effective informative value.<sup>33</sup> This debate drew a long succession

**31** Cf. *Kritische Online-Edition der Nuntiaturrechnungen*.

**32** On the structural characteristics of this source, please refer to the introduction by Daniele Menozzi to *Lettere pastorali dei vescovi*, XI-XXXII.

**33** Cf. Schmidlin, *Die kirchlichen Zustände*; for the reply of Loserth see the review of Schmidlin's work published on the *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 11, 1910, 125-30. On the same line as Loserth took place later Caiazza, "Una fonte 'a responsabilità limitata'?"

of other interventions, until the moment when an intermediate evaluation emerged, far from uncritical glorification and dismantling. Therefore the *relationes* are not comparable to public documents that have legal value; but it is equally clear that they are texts compiled by someone who is placed in a subordinate position with respect to the recipient, with all the consequences that can come from this kind of relationship. The value of this source – just as it happens for all the others – must be weighted case by case, resorting to the necessary crossings with the other documents at our disposal.

The *relationes* return us data that maintain their objectivity (such as the number of priests, religious, churches and monasteries, the presence of a seminary, the charitable activities or the celebration of the synod); but when they report on pastoral activity they need to be examined with particular vigilance and critical sense: because as happens to the prefects who send their reports to the central Government, when they are addressing Rome, bishops tend to emphasise their successes or to accentuate the difficulties encountered to justify their failures. Therefore *relationes* have value above all for themselves: because they are able to give us information on the image of itself that the Church had produced in certain contexts and on what the bishops had done to adapt themselves and their dioceses to this image. Lajos Pásztor, one of the most acute investigators of the curial history in the contemporary age, concluded in this regard that the *relationes* inform us about

certain ecclesiastical structures within which the pastoral activity of the bishops took place. But the way in which this was implemented, also conditioned the structures, remaining, of course, in turn conditioned by them. From all this, as from the relationship between bishops and secular and religious clergy, between bishops and faithful, between bishops and political and lay authorities belonging to other religions – all explicit in the text –, is outlined a religious reality, a human reality, whose importance cannot be ignored, which indeed constitutes a very valuable contribution to any historical deepening.<sup>34</sup>

**34** Pásztor, “Recensione”, quoted by Cavalleri, “Visite pastorali”, 106 (“Determinate strutture ecclesiastiche entro le quali si è svolta l’attività pastorale dei vescovi; ma il modo in cui questa si attuava, condizionava anche le strutture, restando, ovviamente, a sua volta condizionata da esse. Da tutto ciò, come dai rapporti tra vescovi e clero secolare e regolare, tra vescovi e fedeli, tra vescovi e autorità politiche e laici appartenenti ad altre religioni – tutti espliciti nel testo –, viene a delinearsi una realtà religiosa, una realtà umana, di cui non può essere ignorata l’importanza, che anzi costituisce un contributo validissimo ad ogni approfondimento storico”).

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