

The *relationes ad limina* of the German Bishops From Post-War Emergency to Confronting the ‘Double’ Materialist Threat (1948-58)

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Abstract The paper analyses the content of the *relationes ad limina* drawn up by German bishops between 1948 and 1958. In their abundance of information, these documents make it possible, among other things, to shed light on the episcopate's view of the material and moral condition of the German Catholic population in the immediate post-war period and in the 1950s, as well as on the situation of the Catholic Church in the two German states (FRG and GDR) separated by the 'Iron Curtain'. In the last years of Pius XII's pontificate, a cause of great concern for the ecclesiastical hierarchy was on the one hand 'practical' materialism in a West Germany that was experiencing a phase of rapid economic growth, and on the other dialectical materialism in an East Germany under Soviet influence.

Keywords Catholic Church in Germany. German Episcopate. *Relationes ad limina*. Cold War. Materialism.

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1 Introduction

The *relationes ad limina* written by the German bishops between the epilogue of the Second World War and the end of Pius XII's pontificate total 56: 18 date to 1948, 19 to 1953 and the same number to 1958.¹ At that time, there were 22 Catholic dioceses on German territory:² for more than half of them, all three *relationes* are available (e.g., for the important dioceses of Cologne, Münster and Trier), while for others, two (Berlin, Eichstätt, Freiburg, Munich, Paderborn, Speyer) or only one (Meißen, Würzburg) are preserved in the Vatican Apostolic Archive. The reason for such gaps is generally to be found in the succession between two bishops that occurred not too distant from the time when the *relatio* was to be presented: in this case the new Ordinary was allowed to refrain from producing the document.³

Taken as a whole, the *relationes* not only provide a great deal of specific information on the various dioceses, but also make it possible to clearly grasp an evolution that took place within the space of just a few years: that of a Germany which, after the historical caesura of 1945 and the post-war emergency, experienced an era of rapid economic growth and the consequent spread of new kinds of social behaviour in its western part, while the eastern one became a building ground for the Socialist state. In this respect, the *relationes* of the German bishops can be divided into two distinct groups: on the one hand, those of 1948, which offer a picture of the difficulties that the defeated population – and with it also the ecclesiastical authority – had to face in the years immediately following the fall of the National Socialist regime; on the other hand, the documents of the 1950s, which mostly refer to a country, West Germany, that was undergoing profound socio-economic and cultural transformations – the Marshall Plan ended in 1951 – but which sometimes also allow us to investigate the condition of the Catholic Church in East Germany.

1 According to the instructions of the decree *A remotissima* (1909), which came into force in 1911, the German bishops had to present the *relatio ad limina* in the third year of each quinquennium (cf. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* [AAS], 2 (1910), 13-16: 14): this explains the deadlines of 1948 (8th quinquennium), 1953 (9th quinquennium) and 1958 (10th quinquennium). The new questionnaire issued by the Consistorial Congregation in November 1918 (cf. AAS, 10 (1918), 487-503) had not been accompanied by a modification of this *modus procedendi*. It is interesting to notice, moreover, that some *relationes* from 1958 (Augsburg, Eichstätt, Freiburg and Speyer) bear a date subsequent to the death of Pius XII (9 October 1958).

2 Neither the Erzbischöfliches Amt Görlitz constituted in 1946, which formally fell within the archdiocese of Wrocław, nor the diocese of Essen erected in 1958, are included in this number.

3 Thus the decree *A remotissima*: “Si annus exhibendae relationi adsignatus, ex toto vel ex parte, incidit in primum biennium ab initio dioecesis regimine, fas erit Ordinario ab exhibenda relatione, et a visitatione sacrorum Liminum peragenda pro ea vice, abstinere” (AAS, 2 (1910), 13-16: 15).

The structure of this paper is based specifically on this subdivision.

At the end of the war, Germany was a territory militarily occupied by the four victorious powers (USA, Great Britain, France and the Soviet Union).⁴ In the summer of 1945, then, the Potsdam Conference decided that the German regions east of the Oder-Neisse line were to be annexed to Poland and the USSR. The situation of a large portion of the population was desperate, especially in the big cities: civilians had to face a shortage of food and clothing, as well as heating material; there was a lack of sufficient living space due to the destruction provoked by the bombings; diseases such as tuberculosis and typhus were widespread; many industrial plants were seriously damaged or at a standstill, resulting in mass unemployment. Further complicating this scenario was the migration of over twelve million ethnic German refugees - almost half of whom were Catholics - from the former *Reich* territories and other parts of Eastern Europe: this mass of *Heimatvertriebene* (Expellees), deprived of everything, flooded primarily within the borders of the dioceses of East-Central Germany (Paderborn, Hildesheim, Osnabrück, Fulda, Meißen).⁵ Personally interested in the vicissitudes of the German people, Pius XII was able to send them material aid from the Vatican only from 1946 onwards.⁶

In spite of the political upheavals and drastic changes in the country, the Holy See opted not to modify its diocesan structure, not even after the formal division between West Germany (FRG) and East Germany (GDR) in 1949. On the other hand, Pope Pacelli did not carry out any new ecclesiastical reorganisation of the regions acquired by Poland as a result of the conflict: this had to wait until the early 1970s.⁷ In the context of the incipient Cold War, thus, the territory of five German dioceses (Fulda, Osnabrück, Paderborn, Würzburg, and to a lesser extent Hildesheim) ended up being directly crossed by the 'Iron Curtain'. But the contraposition between the two blocs obviously also affected the diocese of Berlin, by virtue of West Berlin being an enclave in the GDR. The fact that it extended over two countries on completely divergent paths, however, did not prevent the German Catholic Church from continuing to consider itself as one and having an episcopal conference (the Fuldaer Bischofskonferenz) in which all Ordinaries participated.

After the cessation of hostilities, the Holy See endeavoured to obtain detailed information about the actual state of the Church in Germany and the religious and moral situation in the various dioceses.

⁴ Cf. Hürten, "Beobachtungen zur Situation".

⁵ On Catholic Church and *Heimatvertriebene* in post-war Germany see Bendel, *Aufbruch aus dem Glauben?*; Voßkamp, *Katholische Kirche und Vertriebene*.

⁶ Cf. Leiber, "Pius XII.", 114; Wollasch, *Humanitäre Auslandshilfe*, 55-7.

⁷ Cf. Hallier, "La Santa Sede e la questione tedesca", 14-15.

In addition to re-establishing stable contacts with the German episcopate, Pius XII therefore decided to send three Vatican missions to the country between the late spring and autumn of 1945. The last of these initiatives led to the creation of a permanent structure in Kronberg im Taunus (near Frankfurt), headed by the German-American Bishop Aloisius Muench (1889-1962) from the summer of 1946.⁸ Only a few months after his transfer in Germany, Muench carried out an apostolic visitation on behalf of the Holy See in the American, French and British occupation zones. From this experience originated a general report which was delivered to Pius XII in the winter of 1947,⁹ and which could draw on accounts prepared in the German dioceses in anticipation of the Visitor's arrival.¹⁰ Looking at the period after the end of the war, therefore, it is worth noting that the *visita ad limina* of 1948 did not coincide with the first occasion on which the Holy See was able to receive extensive information on the condition of the Catholic Church in Germany.

2 An Awkward Post-War Period: The *relationes* of 1948

“Die Not ist groß, ist riesengroß” (The need is great, is huge): this assertion appeared no less than four times in the collective pastoral letter of August 1947 in which the German bishops highlighted the difficulties of the post-war period, looking at both material and moral-religious aspects.¹¹ The *relationes* delivered to the Holy See during the following year, when German territory was still divided into zones of occupation, were in turn a mirror of the problems that afflicted the population and which inevitably also affected the activity of the Catholic clergy. In many regions, the organisation of pastoral care (*Seelsorge*) underwent a very severe test because of the arrival of the *Heimatvertriebene*, all the more so when at the same time numerous places of worship had been damaged or destroyed as a consequence of the wartime devastation and the number of priests was insufficient in relation to requirements (*Priestermangel*). In some cases the displacement of people was so great that it profoundly changed the denominational face of the dioceses: in his *relatio* of 1948, the Bishop of Fulda Johann Baptist Dietz (1879-1959) reported, for ex-

8 Concerning Muench and the Papal Mission of Kronberg – which operated until 1951 – see especially Alsheimer, *Der Vatikan in Kronberg*; Barry, *American Nuncio*; Brown-Fleming, *The Holocaust and Catholic Conscience*.

9 Cf. *Rapporto generale*.

10 Cf. Aloisius Muench to Josef Frings (archbishop of Cologne), 9 September 1946. Helbach, *Westliche Besatzungszonen*, 778-9.

11 Cf. *Hirtenwort des deutschen Episkopats*, 21 August 1947. Helbach, *Westliche Besatzungszonen*, 1293-301.

ample, more than 800,000 Catholics under his jurisdiction, when before the war there had been only 370,000;¹² on the other hand, the Bishop of Passau Simon Konrad Landersdorfer (1880-1971) associated the arrival of a large number of non-Catholics from the East with the loss of the (almost) totally Catholic aspect of the Bavarian diocese (“*facies catholica Dioecesis in perpetuum evanuit*”).¹³ The migrations significantly increased the phenomenon of the ‘diaspora’, i.e., the dispersion of Catholic communities in geographical areas dominated by Protestants: a situation that for a Catholic priest was synonymous with severe complications in fulfilling the *Seelsorge*. It was in the territories of the diaspora that the problem of the lack of churches, or at least of churches with the capacity to accommodate a considerably larger Catholic population, was now most acute. And it was precisely the parishes of the (old or new) diaspora, on the other hand, that usually presented the worst data regarding the observance of the Church’s precepts.

With the end of the war, the episcopate nurtured the hope of a return to God of the German people, of a religious renaissance above the rubble of Hitler’s ‘neo-paganism’, and at the same time urged Catholics to build a new Germany with a clear and lasting Christian stamp. The aspiration for a ‘Christianisation’ (*Verchristlichung*) of post-war German society¹⁴ permeated various statements issued by the ecclesiastical authority in the period following the fall of the National Socialist regime. This was the case, for instance, of a pastoral letter promulgated by the bishops of the western dioceses in June 1945, with the concept of the ‘fear of God’ (“*Ehrfurcht vor Gott*”) at its centre: it expressed the conviction that the construction of a new order after the tragedy of the war should be based on respect for divine law, on a return to the observance of God’s commandments that had previously been neglected – with disastrous consequences.¹⁵ Soon, however, the episcopate would realise that the much longed-for religious revival was in fact an illusion: the 1948 *relationes* of Albert Stohr (1890-1961), bishop of Mainz,¹⁶ and Ferdinand Dirichs (1894-1948), bishop of Limburg,¹⁷ offer clear evidence of this awareness.

12 Cf. Fulda 1948 (no page numbers).

13 Passau 1948, 9.

14 In this regard see Löhr, “Rechristianisierungsvorstellungen”; Repgen, “Die Erfahrung des Dritten Reiches”, 136-42.

15 *Hirtenwort der westdeutschen Bischöfe*, 5 June 1945. Volk, *Akten deutscher Bischöfe*, 521-9.

16 “Sperabamus, quod recuperata libertate religiosa post interitum ‘socialismi nationalis’ vita religiosa reforesceret, sed haec spes fefellit” (Mainz 1948, 21).

17 “Licet statim post bellum finitum aestus quidam vitae religiosae [...] observatus sit, tamen dolendum est, istum fervorem religiosum iamiam plus minusve decrevisse” (Limburg 1948, 26).

From the German *relationes*, it emerges how in rural regions religious practice was much more deeply rooted than in urban areas, and especially in the large cities. Traditionally, the countryside offered priests engaged in pastoral care more consoling scenarios than the industrial contexts.¹⁸ There the secularisation of mentality and customs had a harder time imposing itself, and the percentage of those who habitually attended Sunday Mass or fulfilled the Easter precept proved this.¹⁹ Among the factors responsible for having inflicted damage on the moral and religious life of Catholic communities, some bishops mentioned the National Socialist regime with its ideology, which had been particularly harmful to youth, but also the experience of the war.²⁰ However, what most alarmed the episcopate in this regard was the complicated situation of the German people at the time when the *relationes* were being written: it was precisely the widespread post-war deprivation, in fact, that was generally recognised as an element capable of distracting individuals from consideration of the religious dimension and respect for Christian norms.

This opinion had already been brought to the attention of Pius XII himself, so that in a letter of January 1947 the pope had reported the bishops' concern that an existence of hardship and suffering was for many a practically insurmountable obstacle to a return to religion.²¹ On the part of the German episcopate, in other words, a connection was established between material destitution and atrophy of the spiritual life. The *relationes ad limina* of 1948 provide many examples of this. I will mention just a few: the elderly Cardinal Archbishop of Munich Michael von Faulhaber (1869-1952) pointed out how the mores of the people gave the impression of worsening day by day because of the great penury;²² the Cardinal Bishop of Berlin Konrad von Preysing (1880-1950) wrote that many, worn out

18 On this aspect cf. Tacchi, *Katholischer Antisozialismus*, 157-70.

19 This was the case, among others, in the archdiocese of Cologne: "Praeceptum audiendi Missam diebus festis fideles in paroeciis ruralibus maxima ex parte observant, non raro omnes fere. In oppidis maioribus pars minor quam dimidium Sacro interest. [...] Virorum circiter 45-50 pro centum, mulierum circiter 65-70 pro centum communionem paschalem suscipiunt, sed differentia magna inter paroecias rurales et paroecias in oppidis maioribus locum habet" (Cologne 1948, 48).

20 The Archbishop of Bamberg Joseph Otto Kolb (1881-1955) wrote, for example: "Ubique fides et mores christiani adhuc vigent, quamvis ob perversa Nazismi principia et belli atrocissimi (1939-1945) diuturnitatem et effectus vulnera hiantia religioni christianae sint porrecta" (Bamberg 1948, 52).

21 "Mehrere von euch weisen darauf hin [...], dass der Kampf mit der Not, das Ringen um die nackte Existenz, die geradezu zermürbende Bedrängnis durch Freude- und Hoffnungslosigkeit Hemmungen für einen religiösen Wiederaufstieg bilden, die für viele praktisch noch nicht überwindbar sind" (Pius XII to the German episcopate, 18 January 1947. Helbach, *Westliche Besatzungszonen*, 963-71: 969).

22 "Maxima penuria populi mores in dies peiores fieri videntur" (Munich 1948, 16).

by prolonged poverty, neglected their religious duties or even separated themselves from the Church “sub influxu atheismi”;²³ thinking of the condition of the *Heimatvertriebene*, the Archbishop of Paderborn Lorenz Jaeger (1892-1975) recognised the existence of an intimate link (“intimus nexus”) between the evils that threatened Christian life and political, economic and social calamities.²⁴

Several bishops expressed the fear that the continuing precarious post-war conditions might foster the propaganda of atheistic communism: some, on the other hand, went so far as to explicitly use the term ‘materialism’ to define an attitude found among the German civilians burdened by circumstances. In his *relatio* the Bishop of Osnabrück Hermann Wilhelm Berning (1877-1955) – at the head of that diocese since 1914! – reported on quite a few Catholics who in practice gave themselves over to materialism (“in praxi materialismum colunt”);²⁵ writing about the diocese of Fulda, Dietz mentioned the existence of a materialism increased by the misery of the population (“materialismus, adhuc auctus ex miseria populi”);²⁶ and similarly the Bishop of Aachen Johannes Joseph van der Velden (1891-1954) spoke of a materialistic spirit (“spiritus ille materialismi”) nourished by the concrete post-war difficulties.²⁷ This was, clearly, a materialism that was quite different from dialectical materialism and therefore from Marxism: rather, by this term the bishops generally referred to an almost exclusive focus on material needs dictated by the state of extreme necessity, which left practically no room for consideration of the religious sphere, and which could be accompanied by an accentuated search for sensible pleasures in a context of great deprivation.

The *relationes* also reveal how the German episcopate, in the post-war period, was greatly anxious about the preservation of the Christian family and respect for morality within married life. Often the conflict had put a strain on the relationship between spouses – as well as that between parents and children – particularly because of the long absence from home of men engaged in combat or held as prisoners. In the *relationes* of 1948, many bishops pointed out with regret phenomena such as the increase in the number of divorces and the practice of birth control, with the latter usually attributed to the economic difficulties of families. Bishop Michael Keller of Münster

23 “Multi defatigati sunt ob continuatam inopiam, officia religiosa neglegunt, immo ab ecclesia prorsus sub influxu atheismi deficiunt” (Berlin 1948, 48).

24 “Quo patet quidam intimus nexus inter mala, quibus vita christiana periclitatur, et calamitates politicas, oeconomicas et sociales, quae nostram facultatem omnino excedunt” (Paderborn 1948, 39).

25 Osnabrück 1948 (no page numbers).

26 Fulda 1948 (no page numbers).

27 Aachen 1948, 26.

(1896-1961) mentioned the internal dissolution of family life (“*interna dissolutio vitae familiaris*”) as one of the most serious concerns of the present time.²⁸ A further alarming factor was the growth of religiously mixed marriages (*Mischehen*),²⁹ which, according to the ecclesiastical authority, seriously exposed Catholics to the danger of religious indifference, and which Cardinal Faulhaber even described as the greatest cross (“*maxima crux*”) for the clergy.³⁰ The increase of *Mischehen* after the war was determined to a considerable extent by the arrival of the millions of *Heimatvertriebene*, which led to a greater confessional mixture on German territory: this did not go unnoticed by the bishops.³¹ The interest in the preservation of the Christian family did not diminish during the 1950s, nor did the concern for the proliferation of mixed marriages: indeed, in January 1958, these became the specific subject of a collective pastoral letter resulting from an internal debate within the episcopal body.³²

3 The 1950s and the ‘Double’ Materialist Threat

With the formal creation of the FRG and the GDR in 1949, German territory was definitively included in the contraposition between the blocs that characterised the Cold War. During the 1950s, therefore, the Catholic Church found itself operating in two profoundly different contexts. In the East, in addition to adapting to a regime of total separation from the state, it had to reckon with measures of the political authority which restricted its activities in various ways, and which especially between 1952 and 1953 recalled the dark days of National Socialist persecution. Against the pervasive influence of Communist ideology, the bishops of the eastern dioceses were forced to devise strategies to protect the small Catholic minority.³³ From 1950 onward they formed their own conference, which later became known as *Berliner Ordinarienkonferenz*: this, however, was only meant to be

28 Münster 1948, 19.

29 On this subject cf. Bendikowski, “Eine Fackel der Zwietracht”.

30 Munich 1948, 7.

31 The Bishop of Rottenburg Joannes Baptista Sproll (1870-1949) wrote in his 1948 *relatio*: “Numerus matrimoniorum mixtorum de anno in annum crescit, quia multi catholici ex regionibus orientalibus in partes protestanticas Wurttembergici status translocati sunt. Ibi vivunt inter maiorem numerum acatholicorum et cum eis matrimonia ineunt” (Rottenburg 1948, 11).

32 Cf. *Protokoll der Fuldaer Bischofskonferenz*, 24-27 September 1957. Hürten, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 447-61: 448.

33 Regarding the condition of the Catholic Church in the German Democratic Republic see especially Kösters, Tischner, *Katholische Kirche*; Pilvousek, *Die katholische Kirche*; Raabe, *SED-Staat*; Schäfer, *Staat und katholische Kirche*; Tischner, *Katholische Kirche*.

a regional assembly within the German bishops' plenary conference.³⁴

Much more favourable was the situation in the West, where the Church enjoyed ample freedom and leeway to act within society, and where the proportion of Catholics to Protestants had increased following the division into two states.³⁵ Already between 1948 and 1949, therefore, the episcopate could try to influence the decisions of the Parlamentarischer Rat - the body in charge of drafting a constitution for West Germany - in the conviction that it was facing a decisive step for the future of the Church and German Catholicism.³⁶ The charter finally approved in May 1949, however, was only partially satisfactory for the ecclesiastical authority. Just three months later, then, the first federal elections sanctioned the victory of the CDU/CSU, followed by the beginning of the long chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer (1876-1967). On a different level, the economic boom that followed the currency reform (*Währungsreform*) of 1948 and the Marshall Plan had a positive impact on the living conditions and changed the physiognomy of West German society. Nevertheless, not only did it not pave the way for the religious renaissance that the bishops had considered possible at the end of the war, but it also led to the spread of a consumerist ethos that the episcopate itself was quick to stigmatise, seeing in it a tangible sign of a departure from Christian moral values.

In the final years of Pius XII's pontificate, in fact, the German bishops had the impression that they were confronted with a fearsome 'double' materialist threat: of 'practical' materialism in West Germany, and of dialectical materialism in the GDR.³⁷ An emblematic example of this is the *relatio ad limina* written by Bishop Dietz in September 1958 about a diocese of Fulda divided in two by the 'Iron Curtain': in the West the life of Catholics was conditioned by liberalism and 'practical' materialism, in the East by dialectical materialism

34 The bishops of Fulda, Paderborn, Osnabrück and Würzburg, who all resided in the FRG, participated only indirectly in the Berliner Ordinarienkonferenz. Here they were represented by the vicars and *Kommissare* who were responsible for the ecclesiastical administration of the part of those dioceses which was included in the GDR (Generalvikariat Erfurt, Erzbischöfliches Kommissariat Magdeburg, Bischöfliches Kommissariat Schwerin, Bischöfliches Kommissariat Meiningen).

35 In 1950 51.2% of West Germans were Protestant, 45.2% Catholic (cf. Collotti, *Storia delle due Germanie*, 566-7). For introductory remarks about the situation of Catholicism in West Germany during the 1950s cf. Doering-Manteuffel, "Kirche und Katholizismus"; Gabriel, "Katholizismus und katholisches Milieu".

36 On this subject cf. Gotto, "Die katholische Kirche"; van Schewick, "Die katholische Kirche". Furthermore, the documents in Mertens, *Westliche Besatzungszonen und Gründung*.

37 Since the 19th century, the term 'materialism' had been associated, in Catholic culture, with the various intellectual and political currents (including communism) that contradicted the natural law and the Church's social doctrine: it therefore had a decidedly negative connotation. Cf. Kösters, *DDR 1951-1957*, 27.

promoted and spread by the political authority.³⁸ Discontent with behaviour and trends that were taking hold in the emerging affluent society characterised many *relationes* of the 1950s. In 1953, for example, the Bishop of Eichstätt Joseph Schröffer (1903-1983) wrote that even in his diocese the materialistic contagion was to be noted: this manifested itself in an unbridled desire for pleasures, untameable licence, light-heartedness and a shirking of sacrifice.³⁹ The Bishop of Trier Matthias Wehr (1892-1967) feared that the Catholic faith of the people would be weakened and morals corrupted by the growing lust for earthly goods and sensual pleasures.⁴⁰ Five years later, the Bishop of Speyer Isidor Markus Emanuel (1905-1991) informed the Roman Curia that many of his diocesans had recently experienced an improvement in their living conditions, but that this had resulted in spiritual harm: they were striving in vain to serve two masters, namely God and Mammon, and infected by ‘practical’ materialism they did not seek the things of heaven, but those of earth.⁴¹

Particularly interesting is a remark by the Cardinal Archbishop of Munich Joseph Wendel (1901-1960) – who succeeded Faulhaber in 1952 – in his *relatio* of May 1958. Here he alluded to a change that had occurred in the causes of the population’s moral decline, or rather in the relationship between socio-economic aspects and the moral-religious dimension: if at first – Wendel wrote – mores had been marred by poverty, later on they had been negatively affected by an abundance of available goods.⁴² On the part of the episcopate, the ‘practical’ materialism associated with the West German society of the 1950s was probably perceived as a greater danger than the materialism induced by the state of generalised destitution in early post-war Germany: certainly, however, it had to appear less excusable.

38 “Graves contra fidem errores inter fideles in occidentali dioecesis parte non serpunt. In practicam autem catholicorum vitam liberalismus ac ‘materialismus practicus’ hodierni mundi se immiscet. In zona sovietica materialismus dialecticus a gubernio civili fovetur et propagatur; hoc est praecipuum periculum pro fidelibus, praesertim pro iuventute” (Fulda 1958, no page numbers).

39 “Materialismo hodierno etiam nostrorum finium homines attinguntur et contagione inficiuntur, scilicet] effrenata voluptatum cupidine, indomita licentia, levitate animi, timore et fuga sacrificiorum” (Eichstätt 1953, 39).

40 “Attamen timendum est ne, crescente in dies cupiditate rerum terrestrium et voluptatum, fides catholica [...] nimis debilitetur et mores populi corrumpantur” (Trier 1953, 40).

41 “Ultimis annis permulti fideles prospere profecerunt in bonis temporalibus, sed mundum lucrantes animae suae detrimentum passi sunt. In vanum conantur duobus dominis servire, Deo scilicet et mammonae. Materialismo practico infecti non quaerunt quae supra sunt, sed quae super terram” (Speyer 1958, 18).

42 “Primum rerum inopia deinde rerum abundantia mores populi in multis sunt depravati” (Munich 1958, 27).

It was mainly with urban contexts that the ‘practical’ materialism identified by the bishops was associated, and yet in the *relationes* of the 1950s there is no lack of indications of concern about its extension to the countryside, as a consequence of the narrowing socio-cultural differences between urban and rural areas and the development of modern means of communication and transport. In the diocese of Limburg, according to the 1958 *relatio* of Bishop Wilhelm Kempf (1906-1982), the religious spirit was gradually diminishing even in the rural regions, where ‘practical’ materialism was now influencing the minds of individuals as much as in the cities.⁴³ The Archbishop of Bamberg Josef Schneider (1906-1998) wrote, for his part, of a “*spiritus materialisticus*” that had also penetrated the villages and small towns – where, however, respect for Catholic traditions within families was greater than in the larger centres.⁴⁴ The rural communities – putting to one side the complications typical of diaspora areas – continued to stand out for the proportion of the faithful who regularly attended liturgical services and more generally for the vigour of religious life. It was precisely because of this characteristic that the Catholic hierarchy could not but interpret all the more negatively the phenomenon of abandonment of the countryside – which resulted in the expansion of the urban peripheries – and the signs of a progressive cultural ‘*rapprochement*’ between city and rural dwellers. It is no coincidence that in his 1953 *relatio*, the Bishop of Würzburg Julius Döpfner – later called to lead the dioceses of Berlin and Munich – voiced his deep concern about the looming secularisation of rural regions (“*regionum ruralium imminenti saecularisatione*”).⁴⁵

In the rise of the affluent society and the spread of ‘practical’ materialism, the German episcopate recognised a threat to family morality as well. The desire to enjoy the unprecedented availability of material goods, in particular, was often placed at the basis of the utilisation of methods to limit births – starting with the much-vituperated ‘*conjugal onanism*’ – with which not even Catholic couples were unfamiliar. In this respect, the *relationes* drawn up over a decade by the bishops of Aachen are indicative of how the opinion of the episcopate evolved regarding the origin of the problem. In 1948 Bishop van der Velden related the tendency to limit births to the difficult conditions in which the population was living at that time (“*circumstantiae, in quibus versamur*”);⁴⁶ five years later he again wrote “*circum-*

43 “*Ita spiritus religiosus etiam in regionibus catholicis agrestibus paulatim minuitur, materialismus practicus ibi mentes hominum saltem aequae occupat ac in civitatibus*” (Limburg 1958, 16).

44 Bamberg 1958, 47.

45 Würzburg 1953, 25.

46 Aachen 1948, 22.

stantiae, in quibus versamur”, but added “et spiritus materialismi”;⁴⁷ in 1958, finally, his successor Johannes Pohlschneider (1899-1981) identified precisely the materialistic spirit as the main cause of the phenomenon (“plurimi coniuges revera e spiritu materialismi prolem limitant”).⁴⁸

The condemnation of ‘practical’ materialism did not remain confined to the *relationes ad limina*: during the 1950s, the ecclesiastical authority intervened publicly to warn the Catholic flock against it. After the bishops meeting in the Fulda Conference had approved a document in the summer of 1952 that lamented the estrangement of men from God (“Abwendung der Menschen von Gott”) and the secularisation of hearts (“Verweltlichung der Herzen”),⁴⁹ another joint pastoral letter promulgated in the winter of 1956 openly criticised the manifestations of ‘practical’ materialism and at the same time urged the faithful to do penance. This pastoral letter opened with a reference to the ‘heresy’ (“Irrlehre”) of *dialektischer Materialismus* prevailing in Eastern Europe and its attempts to capture the youth,⁵⁰ yet the focus of the German episcopate was precisely on *praktischer Materialismus*, which, while it did not result in an explicit denial of God and the afterlife, nevertheless led to living as if they did not exist. In their place - the bishops argued - a new idol had taken over, namely the so-called standard of living, the lust for possession and pleasure (“der sogenannte Lebensstandard, Besitz- und Genußgier”).⁵¹ To be stigmatised was essentially a conception of life, detectable in capitalist society, that seemed irreconcilable with Christian values: hence the bishops’ call to repent, not to fall further into a spiral of earthly enjoyments that stifled the needs of the spirit.

The decision to publish this document was taken at the bishops’ Conference in August 1955. On this occasion, the Cardinal Archbishop of Cologne Josef Frings (1887-1978), as chairman of the assembly, attempted to take stock of the decade since the end of the war: he underlined the economic recovery and the regained freedom of the Church in West Germany, while in the East about one sixth of German Catholics still had to live under a totalitarian state, whose ‘colour’ now was red instead of brown (“dessen Farbe von braun zu rot gewech-

⁴⁷ Aachen 1953, 33.

⁴⁸ Aachen 1958, 53.

⁴⁹ “Hirtenwort”, 76. Bishop Albert Stohr of Mainz attached a copy of this document to his 1953 *relatio*.

⁵⁰ *Hirtenbrief*, 3. The text is published in full in Kösters, *DDR 1951-1957*, 646-53. Bishop Stohr also submitted this document to the Roman Curia, as an annex to the 1958 *relatio*.

⁵¹ *Hirtenbrief*, 4.

selt hat").⁵² As dangers threatening the spiritual health of Catholics, Frings mentioned religious indifferentism and 'practical' materialism: harmful in itself, the latter, according to the cardinal, was moreover a forerunner of dialectical materialism.⁵³ Frings, that is, explicitly connected the two sides of the 'double' materialist threat.

The *relationes ad limina* of the dioceses whose territory was wholly or partly included within the borders of the GDR are not without references to the complicated situation of the Catholic Church in the state subject to the influence of the Soviet Union. As is well known, the idea of the irreducible opposition of Catholicism and communism was an integral part of the Magisterium of the Holy See, and in times not so distant had found clear expression in the encyclical *Divini Redemptoris* of Pope Pius XI (19 March 1937).⁵⁴ Only a few months before the birth of the Deutsche Demokratische Republik, then, such an idea was reaffirmed by the decree of the Holy Office that established the excommunication of those Catholics who were members of Communist parties or supported them in various ways (1 July 1949).⁵⁵ The same document, in March 1950, became the object of an explicit reference by the German episcopate in a pastoral letter entitled *Die christliche Wahrheit und der gottlose Materialismus* (The Christian truth and the atheistic materialism), which in substance constituted a critique of the ideological and political foundations of the East German state.⁵⁶

In his *relatio* dated 1 November 1953, Konrad von Preysing's successor on the bishop's seat in Berlin, Wilhelm Weskamm (1891-1956), described a diocese where Catholics made up about 12% of the total population, and where only a little more than a quarter attended Sunday Mass and less than a third fulfilled the Easter precept. While the economic hardship was still far from over, atheistic communism ("communismus atheisticus") strove to win over the younger generation in particular.⁵⁷ Public life did not reveal a Christian or more generally religious aspect ("publica vita [...] generatim nec christianum nec religiosum praebet aspectum"):⁵⁸ in addition to this, there were

52 *Ansprache Frings' auf der Fuldaer Bischofskonferenz*, 23 August 1955. Mertens, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 873-88: 875.

53 "Dass diese praktische Abwendung von Gott, auch bei Aufrechterhaltung eines gewissen äußeren religiösen korrekten Verhaltens, dem dialektischen Materialismus die Wege bereitet, liegt auf der Hand" (*Ansprache Frings' auf der Fuldaer Bischofskonferenz*, 23 August 1955. Mertens, *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 873-88: 884).

54 Cf. AAS, 29 (1937), 65-106. Cf. Chenaux, *L'ultima eresia*, 70-5.

55 Cf. AAS, 41 (1949), 334.

56 *Die christliche Wahrheit und der gottlose Materialismus*, 1 March 1950. Lange, *Katholischer Kirche*, 35-41.

57 Berlin 1953, 15.

58 Berlin 1953, 56.

obstacles to the activity of the clergy and the bishop himself. On 7 October 1958 – two days before the death of Pius XII –, Bishop Otto Spülbeck (1904-1970) produced his *relatio* for the diocese of Meißen in Saxony, the only eastern diocese with no part of its territory outside the GDR.⁵⁹ Here, Catholics constituted only 7.5% of the population, and the official state doctrine (“materialismus dialecticus et historicus”) exerted a deleterious influence on them.⁶⁰ The Christian life of families was weakened both by the context shaped by atheism and by the religious indifferentism stemming from mixed marriages, which were extremely widespread: around one third of the faithful, however, were actually committed to living according to Catholic principles.⁶¹ Worship could take place freely within the sacred buildings – which were still too few to satisfy requirements – while public practices such as processions and pilgrimages met not infrequently with hindrances or prohibitions by the civil authorities. Such a problem was also highlighted by other Ordinaries, for example by Archbishop Lorenz Jaeger in his 1953 *relatio* – he had already done so in 1948. The vast archdiocese of Paderborn was one of those directly crossed by the ‘Iron Curtain’, and thus – to use Jaeger’s own words – was in a certain sense divided in two by a wall (“quasi per murum est in duas partes divisa”).⁶²

The same fate had befallen the diocese of Osnabrück, since the northern region of Mecklenburg was part of the GDR. The last pages of the *relatio* written in August 1958 by Bishop Helmut Hermann Wittler (1913-1987) were dedicated to the difficulties of the *Seelsorge* in that area, and above all expressed the churchman’s disquiet about a youth to whom the path of apostasy was insistently suggested. Wittler made mention of the *Jugendweihe* (“consecration of youth”),⁶³ identified by the German episcopate as a practice aimed at initiating adolescents into atheism and therefore separating them from the Church: it is no coincidence that in 1958 the Bishop of Fulda Dietz expressly spoke of an atheistic rite (“ritus atheisticus”).⁶⁴ Announced in 1954 and carried out for the first time the following year, the *Jugendweihe* was one of the instruments with which the Socialist state tried to transmit its *Weltanschauung* to the new generations

59 “Alle Jurisdiktionsbezirke in der DDR haben einen gewichtigen Teil ihres Bereiches respektive ihrer Priester in der Bundesrepublik mit Ausnahme von Meißen, das ganz in der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik liegt” (Otto Spülbeck to Aloisius Muench, 6 March 1957. Schulte-Umberg, *DDR 1957-1961*, 43-4: 43).

60 Meißen 1958, 11.

61 “Vita christiana privata in familiis tum ambiente atheo tum saepius indifferentismo ex matrimonio mixtae religionis oborto extenuatur, tamen circiter tertia pars fidelium revera omnibus viribus catholice vivere studet” (Meißen 1958, 48).

62 Paderborn 1953, 19.

63 Cf. Osnabrück 1958, 37.

64 Fulda 1958, (no page numbers).

and to combat the influence of the Christian Churches: specifically, it was a sort of rite of passage to adulthood – preceded by a special preparation – in which young people swore allegiance to the cause of socialism and to the state itself.⁶⁵ The East German bishops immediately took a stance against it, and their denunciation was also expressed in the form of a joint declaration of October 1955, which indeed manifested the ecclesiastical authority's opposition to what appeared to be a kind of socialist 'confirmation' and was judged incompatible with the profession of Catholic faith.⁶⁶

The bishops' apprehension for the persistence of the Catholic faith among youth was amplified by the character of public education in the GDR. Immediately after the end of the war, the German episcopate had taken steps to see the re-introduction of the denominational school (*Bekennnisschule*) previously abolished by the National Socialist regime, and in fact in the 1950s this constituted the mainstay of primary education in most West German dioceses. Where the common school for Catholic and Protestant pupils (*Gemeinschaftsschule* or *Simultanschule*) was the norm, this was generally due to the greater demographic weight of the Protestants and the prevalence of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) on the political scene, as in the *Länder* of Hesse and Lower Saxony. Even in these institutes, however, religious instruction, separated by denomination, was always guaranteed. In the GDR, by contrast, religion was not included in the curricula of public schools: not only that, but more generally these served as a powerful vehicle for the propagation of the Socialist state's ideology. In the 1958 *relatio*, Otto Spülbeck wrote not without reason of schools where the principles of atheistic materialism were openly taught and penetrated, as far as possible, into the minds of the pupils.⁶⁷ To back him up, the bishop of Meißen already had some collective pronouncements of the East German ecclesiastical authority against such a situation: a pastoral letter addressed to the faithful in January 1953 had specifically bemoaned the schools without religion where materialism reigned,⁶⁸ and exhorted Catholic parents to

65 Cf. Pilvousek, *Die katholische Kirche*, 423-9; Raabe, *SED-Staat*, 184-7.

66 This document concluded with a peremptory statement: "Wer freiwillig an der Jugendweihe und ihrer Vorbereitung teilnimmt oder seine Kinder dazu schickt, sündigt gegen den Glauben, bringt seinen und den Glauben seiner Kinder in ernste Gefahr und gibt der Gemeinde schwerstes Ärgernis durch schlechtes Beispiel" (*Hirtenbrief der Ordinarien in der DDR zur Jugendweihe*, [11 October 1955]. Kösters, *DDR 1951-1957*, 626-7: 627).

67 "Pueri scholas publicas frequentare tenentur, ubi placita materialismi athei ex professo traduntur et in quantum possibile pueris inculcantur" (Meißen 1958, 51).

68 "In diesen religionslosen Schulen wird der Materialismus gelehrt: vom materialistischen Geist sind die Lehr- und Lernbücher getragen und durchtränkt" (*Hirtenbrief der Ordinarien in der DDR über die christliche Erziehung*, [3 December 1952]. Kösters, *DDR 1951-1957*, 263-5: 263).

take care of the Christian education of their children; this exhortation had then returned in another document of October 1957, containing at the same time a new warning about the deplored *Jugendweihe*.⁶⁹

Still in the last weeks of Pius XII's pontificate, the 'double' materialist threat was object of the German episcopate's attention:⁷⁰ but clearly the possibilities of defence and reaction appeared different between East and West, as did the stakes. The struggle sustained by the Catholic Church in the German Democratic Republic, where the Socialist state strove daily to undermine its internal compactness and to emphasise the irrelevance of the religious phenomenon, took on the contours, ultimately, of a protracted struggle for survival.

4 Concluding Remarks

In the 1958 *relatio*, and more specifically in the *iudicium syntheticum* drafted at the end of the document, Cardinal Wendel defined 'practical' materialism as a great danger of his time ("magnum nostrae aetatis periculum").⁷¹ But the letter of response that the Consistorial Congregation sent a few months later to the archbishop of Munich himself, and which was based on what the latter had reported, spoke instead of "materialismus practicus" as the greatest danger of the present ("maximum nostrae huius aetatis periculum").⁷² The Roman body's choice of a different adjective, which certainly cannot be read as coincidental, points to the question of the Holy See's perception of the phenomenon, as well as that of the possible differences of opinion that might have existed among the various Roman dicasteries in this respect. At the same time, it is legitimate to wonder whether and how the input from Germany – through the *relationes ad limina*, but not only – contributed to shaping the point of view of the head of the Catholic Church. These are questions that still await an adequate answer from historiographical research, and will necessarily have to be addressed also on the basis of the documentation of the Vatican Apostolic Archive that has recently become available for consultation.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Hirtenwort der Berliner Ordinarienkonferenz*, 23 October 1957. Schulte-Umberg, *DDR 1957-1961*, 186-9.

⁷⁰ Thus the German bishops in a collective pastoral letter promulgated by the Fulda Conference in August 1958: "In der Fastenzeit des Jahres 1956 schrieben wir einen gemeinsamen Hirtenbrief über die Gefahr des dialektischen Materialismus als einer grundsätzlichen Gottesleugnung und des praktischen Materialismus als einer gelebten Abkehr von Gott. *Auch diese doppelte Gefahr ist inzwischen gewachsen*" (*Hirtenwort der deutschen Bischöfe*, 20 August 1958. Schulte-Umberg, *DDR 1957-1961*, 379-83: 380; italics added).

⁷¹ Munich 1958, 32.

⁷² Consistorial Congregation 1959 (no folio numbers).

The five-yearly reports, it should be borne in mind, were only one of the means that the bishops had at their disposal to inform Rome of the situation in their dioceses. The Consistorial Congregation, furthermore, could not appear as the privileged interlocutor to whom the most urgent and complex issues were to be submitted in order to obtain suggestions and instructions, quite the contrary: for this there was rather the Secretariat of State led by Pius XII himself.⁷³ The understanding of the actual relevance of the problems reported by the episcopate in the *relationes*, which on the other hand responded to a predetermined questionnaire and were inevitably influenced by the life history and personality of their authors, cannot therefore disregard the parallel analysis of other types of documents, i.e., sources that supplement the information contained in the *relationes* themselves. It is precisely an operation of this kind that confirms that the 'double' materialist threat was a real and constant concern for the German episcopate during the 1950s. Although Catholicism certainly faced greater challenges in the East than in the West, even here the picture was not entirely without shadows. Only a few months after the promulgation of the pastoral letter on materialism in the winter of 1956, Pius XII, in a radio message to the Catholics gathered in Cologne for the *Katholikentag* (Catholic Day), seemed to make the worries of the German bishops his own, urging the faithful who lived in a materialistic world ("in einer materialistischen Welt") to reverse the order of priority between the material and spiritual dimensions and thus to put God first.⁷⁴ The pope's words addressed the German context and certainly based on the information available to the Holy See about Germany. On the other hand, however, it may be useful to frame the matter from a broader perspective. The recognition, in parallel with the rapid economic growth of the Western world, of a form of materialism which did not coincide with the dialectical materialism of the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, and which in fact had its roots in the capitalist system was not only characteristic of the German Church. In order to assess the importance held by this aspect in the final years of Pius XII's pontificate - as well as afterwards, at the time of the Second Vatican Council⁷⁵ - there is therefore

73 It is well known that after the death of Cardinal Luigi Maglione (1877-1944) Pius XII renounced the appointment of a new Secretary of State and personally assumed the leadership of the dicastery. He held it until the end of his pontificate, availing himself for years of the collaboration of Domenico Tardini (1888-1961) and Giovanni Battista Montini (1897-1978).

74 "Il radiomessaggio ai cattolici di Germania", 397. The radio message was broadcast on 2 September 1956.

75 It should be noted, in this regard, that an explicit reference to 'practical' materialism ("plurimi sane, quorum vita materialismo practico inficitur...") occurs in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* of December 1965 (AAS, 58 (1966), 1025-120: 1032).

the possibility of a comparative approach examining various Catholicisms of the Western bloc. Finally, what has been said in the previous pages leads to the observation that the *relationes ad limina* can also be considered as a starting point for the identification of potential research topics: as a 'synthetic overview' that lends itself to the subsequent development of both local history subjects and – as I have tried to do in this paper – reflections on a national case.

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