

A Mirroring Effect. Themes and Problems from *relationes ad limina* for a Profile of the Italian Episcopate after World War II

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Abstract The Italian bishops in their *relationes*, on the one hand, seem to perceive the first signs of changes in a society emerging from the Second World War, on the other hand, they seem to remain within established mental frameworks. The link between the Italian bishops and the Roman Curia appears to be decisive: the questionnaire prepared by the Consistorial Congregation and the responses of the Italian bishops seem to speak the same language, controlled and controller correspond to each other but without being real instruments of verification, they seem to be reflected in a mirror without reality intervening to undermine the analysis criteria firmly acquired.

Keywords Italian Catholic Church. Italian episcopate. Roman Curia. Consistorial Congregation. *Relationes ad limina*. Pius XII.



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Given the large number of Italian dioceses, the premise for this essay is the consideration that it is necessarily a kind of coring, which can have the sole objective of highlighting what may be the main issues emerging from all the reports of the Italian bishops to the Holy See.¹

The can. 340 of the Codex Juris Canonici of 1917, paragraph 2, established the precise calendar based on which the *relationes ad limina* were to be sent to Rome by the various ecclesiastical regions: the five-year period was calculated starting from 1 February 1911 and the *relationes* of the Italian bishops, Corsica, Malta and the smaller islands of the Mediterranean bordering the Italian peninsula had to be the first ones to be received.² This means that, for the period examined here, the *relationes* had to be sent by the Italian bishops in the years 1946, 1951 and 1956.

But this paragraph of the Codex Juris Canonici also says something else, more significant if not surprising: the role played by the Italian episcopate in this function of ‘government reporting’ is preeminent to such an extent that the framework offered by the Italian *relationes* can distort the image of catholicity. It is a kind of ‘mirroring effect’, where the controller and controlled one, by continuously looking at each other, end up finding themselves identical, because they speak the same language, express the same cultural and religious background, and have lived similar experiences.

The five dioceses examined here are Agrigento, Città della Pieve, Mantua, Turin and Venice.³ The criteria used in identifying the sample for this survey were on the one hand continuity over time, that is to say, the presence of a complete series of *relationes* (1946, 1951, 1956), on the other hand, a geographical diversification (north, centre, south) and typological episcopal see, which often corresponds to a diversity of episcopal career. The case of Agrigento is interesting because the author of the three *relationes* is always the same bishop, the Passionist Giovanni Battista Peruzzo.⁴ In the case of Città della

1 An overall look at the main historiographical issues relating to the post-World War II Italian Church is offered by Battelli, “La recente storiografia”.

2 See also the decree “A remotissima Ecclesiae” of 31 December 1909 of the Consistorial Congregation.

3 The Italian *relationes ad limina* for the decade 1946-56 are 280, just under 30% of the entire Catholic episcopate, while those taken into consideration here are less than 2%. It is worth underlining that the instructions for the bishops provided for completing the questionnaire in full only on the occasion of the first *relation*. Starting from the second, it was possible to omit to provide information to those questions for which no changes had occurred in the meantime.

4 Molare (AL), 1878-Le Rocche di Molare, 1963. Former auxiliary of Mantua (1924) and bishop of Oppido Mamertina (1928), he had been appointed bishop of Agrigento in 1932 and in 1952 he would receive the title of archbishop *ad personam*; author also of the two other previous *relationes*, in November 1961, he will be called by Pope John XXIII to be part of the Theological Commission of the Council, where, according to Henri de

Pieve, instead, the reports are only two (1946 and 1956), by two different authors: Giuseppe Angelucci,⁵ who at the time of writing the *relatio* was 78 years old, and Ezio Barbieri,⁶ who wrote the *relatio* at the age of 59. It should be noticed that for the Consistorial Congregation this diocese is “one of the most invaded by communism”.⁷ The documentation of the diocese of Mantua presents a similar history: the first two *relationes* are written by Agostino Domenico Menna,⁸ who in the second post-war period was criticised for his ambiguous favourable attitude towards fascism. This criticism was known to the Holy See because the secretary of the Consistorial Congregation, who drafted the minute for the answer, felt the need to clarify the position of the ordinary in an accompanying note:

Before the war there were some reservations about the diocesan regime of Msgr. Menna, because it seemed that the bishop had expressed himself, both orally and in a written form, openly in favour of the past regime. During the war, however, he deserved better, thanks to his assistance to the clergy, especially those persecuted by the Germans, to the favour accorded to the works of Catholic Action, to the promotion of religious assistance.⁹

The third *relatio* is written by Antonio Poma,¹⁰ a bishop destined to become an important figure in the post-conciliar Italian episcopate.

Lubac, he signalled himself at least on one occasion for a “ridiculous” and “pathetic” intervention (see de Lubac, *Quaderni del Concilio*, 67; see also Lombino, *Il console di Dio*). In Agrigento there are four files, because the file of the 1951 report contains only the justification for the failure to send the report due to the illness of the mother of the Auxiliary Bishop Giovanni Maria Jacono; it follows a time lag for which the report that was to be sent in 1951 will be dated 1953 and the subsequent 1958.

5 Genazzano, 1868-Città della Pieve, 1949. Bishop of Città della Pieve since 1910, a marginal figure of the Italian episcopate, he is among the signatories of the telegram addressed to Mussolini by Giulio de’ Rossi dell’Arno in the name of the “Episcopate and Clergy of autarchic battles” following the declaration of war on 10 June 1940. See Zanini, “Rivendicazioni nazional-cattoliche”. See also Monticone, *Cattolici e fascisti in Umbria*.

6 Buti (PI), 1887-Città della Pieve, 1992. Auxiliary bishop of Pisa in 1945 and bishop of Città della Pieve from 1949 to 1977.

7 Città della Pieve 1956, [c. 59]. Unless otherwise specified, all the translations are by the Author.

8 Chiari (BS), 1875-Camaldolese hermitage of Gussago (BS), 1957. Bishop of Mantua since 1928, he was a figure that, in the absence of recent studies, remains ambiguous towards the fascist regime. See Cavazzoli, *Guerra e Resistenza*; see also the judgement of Ferrari, Manzoli, Martelli, “Fonti per una storia”.

9 Mantua 1946, 5.

10 Villanterio (PV), 1910-Bologna, 1985. Auxiliary bishop of Mantua since 1951, bishop since 1954, the year in which Menna will be warmly invited to resign; since 1967 coadjutor archbishop of Bologna, ordinary since 1968 after the resignation of Giacomo Lercaro; in 1969 he will enter the Sacred College and will be appointed president of the Italian Episcopal Conference. See Volta, Siliberti, Caporello, *Cardinale Antonio Poma*.

As for Città della Pieve, as well as for Mantua, the secretary of the Consistorial Congregation underlines the evident presence of communism: “it is not a diocese of great faith: communism has many followers”, “the clergy is insufficient, vocations are scarce, the people are very communist”.¹¹

In Turin, one of the major industrial cities in Italy, Cardinal Maurilio Fossati¹² was bishop since 1930. After World War II, he sent only one *relatio* to the Consistorial, in 1951. Finally, the case of Venice has interesting characteristics, because the *relationes* are drawn up by three different bishops: Adeodato Giovanni Piazza,¹³ who in 1948 would be called to Rome as general secretary of the Consistorial Congregation and president of the episcopal commission for the Italian Catholic Action, Carlo Agostini¹⁴ and Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli,¹⁵ who writes his first *relatio* at the age of 75.¹⁶

The comparison between the *relationes ad limina* sent in a certain period of time to the Consistorial Congregation by territorially homologous dioceses can offer, first of all, the occasion for a reflection on the serial data presented here in a synoptic framework, which is otherwise only available with more difficulty: the number of priests and their relationship to the size of the population, the number of seminarians and ordinations, the distribution of parishes in the diocesan territory and their increase, the presence of religious, the commitment of the laity, especially organised, through the number of members Catholic Action and other Catholic organisations, social

11 Mantua 1946, 5; 1951, 30.

12 Arona (NO), 1876-Turin, 1965, bishop of Galtelli-Nuoro from 1924 and archbishop of Sassari from 1929. He was created cardinal by Pius XI in 1933. See Guasco, “Fossati Maurilio”. I’m grateful to Don Alessandro Giraudo and Don Prof. Antonio Nigra for his availability for consultation of the *relatio* conserved in the Archiepiscopal Archive of Turin.

13 Vigo di Cadore (BL), 1884-Rome, 1957. Of the Order of Discalced Carmelites, he was patriarch of Venice since 1935, coming from the diocese of Benevento of which he had been appointed bishop in 1930, created cardinal in 1937, in 1948 he would have been called to Rome to the Consistorial Congregation as general secretary. See Caprioli, “Bio-bibliografia sul cardinale”.

14 San Martino di Lupari (PD), 1888-Venice, 1952. Former bishop of Padua in 1932. See Niero, *I patriarchi di Venezia*.

15 Sotto il Monte (BG), 1881-Rome, 1963. Official bishop in Bulgaria in 1925 (later apostolic delegate in 1931), apostolic delegate to Turkey and Greece in 1934, then apostolic nuncio to France in 1944, he was nominated patriarch of Venice and elevated to the cardinal purple in 1953; he will be elected Pope in 1958. Considering the extensive literature on Pope John XXIII, we mention here only Galavotti, “Pace e Vangelo”.

16 In the accompanying letter, Patriarch Roncalli will allude, not without irony, to the fact: “I am particularly pleased to send your Eminence this first (which will be, without illusions on my part, even the only one) Report on the state of the diocese of Venice”, an allusion which, however, seems not to have been understood by the secretary of the Consistorial which notes the passage with a question mark. See Venice 1956, 78.

transformations through the number of mixed marriages, “concubitates”, but also cinemas, theatrical performances. A further interesting perspective, which however requires specific skills, can be offered by financial statements and economic reports. To give just one example: in the pastoral context, the lack of priests in relation to the overwhelming demographic growth and urbanisation of the Italian population, combined with the need to increase the capillarity of the ecclesial presence through parishes is one of the most recurrent topics that affect the whole of Italy. On this point, the most effective synthesis, which frames the problem within a traditional conception, appears to be the one offered by Patriarch Roncalli, who wrote in his accompanying letter: “to have more priestly vocations to save more souls and to better ensure the triumph of love and the kingdom of Christ the Savior”, which seems to recall Pius XII’s words in *Mystici Corporis*, although with Roncalli’s personal style, “priests and religious both men and women, who have been called to the service of God, and who, at home and in the foreign missions, are protecting, increasing, and advancing the Kingdom of the Divine Redeemer”.¹⁷

The *relationes* were written in the context of a country that had just come out of World War II: all the dioceses in 1946 had to intervene in the reconstruction of buildings, especially churches, even though specific issues manifested themselves depending on how the conflict had taken place. For example, in Agrigento “public morals were compromised mainly by the Anglo-American invasion”,¹⁸ in the same way in Mantua “the morale of the people has deteriorated [...] due to the frequent passage of foreign troops”. Here, however, also the example of virtue and piety brought by Catholic foreign soldiers was mentioned.¹⁹

The case of Mantua offers the starting point for considerations regarding the relationship between the Catholic Church and the liberation struggle.²⁰ In the 1946 report, Msgr. Menna used his answer to question 52 (“whether there are among the clergy those who read unseemly books, periodicals or newspapers with scandal; who unduly meddle in political and administrative life; who have been reduced to the lay state”) as an opportunity to provide a long and detailed list of those Mantuan priests who “had relations with the Italian liberation forces called ‘partisans’ during the war”: some had to flee to Switzerland or, when captured, ended up in Dachau or in the prisons of Verona and Mantua or were forced to house arrest in the bishop’s

17 Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, no. 101.

18 Agrigento 1946, no. 46.

19 Mantua 1946, no. 84.

20 On the theme of the relationship between the Italian Catholic Church and the liberation struggle, Giovanni Miccoli’s reflections remain penetrating: Miccoli, “Chiesa, partito cattolico, società civile”.

palace awaiting trial. The list also includes Don Eugenio Leoni, who was hanged by the SS outside the 'Predella' gate on Sunday 12 September 1943.²¹ It should be noticed that the Mantuan bishop, in reporting the biographical data of his priests, never felt the need or the opportunity to say anything about the reasons that led them to choose the side of partisans.

Above all, the war seems to have weakened the 'defensive barrier' against the 'real danger', which always remains communism.²² According to the interpretation of the events given by the bishops, the war caused destructions that seemed to favour communist subversion: "War, famine, lack of work, the spread of communist ideas and other reasons have caused so much depression in the spiritual and moral life that our mind is afflicted with many worries";²³ "The last war and communism have corrupted the customs of the people. Faith, religion, honesty, integrity of life, justice, piety have received serious damage";²⁴ "People are generally kept religious, but there is a great danger for the integrity of the Catholic faith, especially among peasants and workers, not a few of them adhere to socialism and communism, guided by ignorance and deceived by promises";²⁵ "The causes of moral laxity are to be found in the serious economic crisis of our time, which allows communists to deny divine providence and civil order by promoting class struggle and hatred of the Church, which alone can prevent them from succeeding".²⁶

The anti-communist sentiment in the *relationes* of the decade 1946-56 is the most consistent feature and is inserted in different numbers of the questionnaire: from question 16 (on errors against faith) to the entire 11th chapter "De populo fidei", from the question on the modality and frequency of the administration of confirmation (28)²⁷ to that of mixed marriages (32). Communism "undermines the religious foundations",²⁸ and "has a greater responsibility in de-Christianising the Christian people";²⁹ "it spreads among the faithful and has become so strong in the minds of many that they become blind and deaf",³⁰ "due to the strong presence of communism,

21 Mantua 1946, no. 52.

22 See Chenaux, *L'ultima eresia*.

23 Agrigento 1946, no. 86.

24 Città della Pieve 1956, no. 84.

25 Venice 1947, no. 100.

26 Turin 1951, no. 100.

27 The question is that of the inscription at the Communist Party of the godparents.

28 Agrigento 1946, no. 16.

29 Agrigento 1958, no. 84.

30 Città della Pieve 1956, nos. 16-20.

religious life in many places is relaxed”;³¹ “the faithful easily follow the Communist and Socialist parties being persuaded by them that the solution to the economic problem and the comfortable life can come the so-called ‘Material well-being’”.³²

In the industrial city of Turin “the communists are admired for their activity and enthusiasm, they benefit from many aids and initiatives and in fact they dominate [the social activities] by their energy”;³³ in Venice, communism “is particularly concerned with the conditions of the people and the working class, but it discredits faith and religious life”³⁴ and “many workers and peasants, to whom some pseudo-intellectuals add, join these parties”.³⁵

However, this criticism doesn’t go beyond signalling a danger and no solutions are offered, perhaps because the *relatio* is not the most suitable means, perhaps because they are taken for granted. At the same time, the reduction of the concept of ‘communism’ to include everything that does not correspond to one’s own mental schema, in fact to everything extraneous and external to the ecclesiastical institution, seems to reflect the difficulty in reading the transformations that are taking place on the social level in post-World War II Italian society. The episcopate seems to prefer instead to recognise the affinity of present situation with events of the more or less recent past: thus the difficulties encountered by Msgr. Menna in Mantua in 1946 are due to the fact that this land “gave rise and growth to men resentful of religion such as [Roberto] Ardigò, Enrico Ferri, [Enrico] Dugoni and others similar”; in Agrigento, however, “the danger of socialism is increasing, due to the poverty in which the people find themselves, the nature of the work in the mines and the tradition that derives from the time of the Hon. De Felice”.³⁶

After the Second World War, the perception of a rift fracture between the city and the countryside, between industrial workers and the peasant world – which for at least a century seemed to have become the guiding criterion for the presence of the Catholic Church in contemporary society –, seems to find confirmation also in the reports: the Catholic Church proposes to offer a criterion for reading

31 Città della Pieve 1946, no. 100.

32 Mantua 1956, no. 100.

33 Turin 1951, no. 98.

34 Venice 1951, no. 16.

35 Venice 1956, no. 98.

36 On Giuseppe De Felice, the founder in 1891 of the Catania workers’ group, see Biscione, “De Felice Giuffrida, Giuseppe”; on Enrico Ferri and Enrico Dugoni, the protagonists of Mantua socialism between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, see Cavazzoli, Salvadori, *Storia della cooperazione mantovana*; on Roberto Ardigò, philosopher, the highest representative of Italian positivism, see Bortone, s.v. “Ardigò, Roberto”.

social, economic and cultural issues capable of holding together the rural world and the city bourgeoisie. This emerges, for example, from the differences in sacramental practice that the pastoral visits to the diocese and the reports of the parish priests highlighted: “in general, mass on holidays is attended more in the countryside, less in the city. [...] In the countryside, extreme unction is rarely rejected; in the city, however, is easier that the priest is not called by relatives so as not to frighten the sick”.³⁷ In Turin, it is also observed that civil funerals are more numerous for workers, who are members of the communist party. According to the Patriarch of Venice Agostini “outside the city people are more religious, as in every part of the world”,³⁸ while Roncalli observed that 65% of adults attend mass in rural areas, whereas only 40% or even less do so in the city.³⁹ This observation by Patriarch Roncalli illuminates a topic which is taken up by all the bishops, namely the generational and the gender issue: children and women are assiduous in their attendance, and to a lesser extent young men and women, adults are more often absent.

The practical consequences of these privileged relations between the Church and certain sectors of society are also reflected in the success of the promotion of priestly vocations: “for the diocese of Venice, the resources and aid from the parishes of the countryside are necessary, since the parishes of the cities are just self-sufficient. [...] And in fact, most of those who happen to be called by the Lord come from the countryside”.⁴⁰

The fracture also reveals a principle of emancipation on the ethical level on the part of the city bourgeoisie: if the bishop of Agrigento remained more general, observing that “the inner cities are still immune, but wherever the so-called civilisation arrives, evil prevails”,⁴¹ almost all the other bishops specifically identified in ‘onanism’ (i.e., birth control) the generically most deplorable “vice [...] especially in the city”.⁴² Carlo Agostini was the only one to try to understand the reasons, identifying them in the “high rent of the houses”, which for many exceeded the annual income. Taking up these considerations, his successor Angelo Roncalli noted, without passing any form of judgment, the novelty of the recourse to the Ogino-Knaus contraceptive method.⁴³

Roncalli himself seems to propose the only serious attempt to understand the transformations on the anthropological level, while re-

³⁷ Turin 1951, no. 86.

³⁸ Venice 1951, no. 84.

³⁹ Venice 1956, no. 86.

⁴⁰ Venice 1956, no. 100.

⁴¹ Agrigento 1958, no. 84.

⁴² Venice 1951, no. 87.

⁴³ Venice 1956, no. 87.

maintaining, however, within a framework that reflects the traditional uncompromising thought: “among the moral aberrations, what they call human sense or ‘humanism’ should be condemned without indulgence” which “spreads more and more”; morality, left to the individual’s conscience alone, is weakened because evil is not deplored but considered “a purely natural and necessary act, such as eating and drinking, and accepting it is not only an act of compassion but also entirely justifiable, until society suffers direct and immediate damage”.⁴⁴

The different attitudes towards customs and morality, which were already present in the relationship between Catholic Church and fascism, emerge also after 1945 and express a hierarchical and conservative paternalism, which insists on ecclesiastical privileges and is fearful of the turmoil and expectations emerging in the country: dancing⁴⁵ and Sunday entertainment, sport and, above all, the cinema, a true propaganda tool for freedom that has become the major diversion and which requires a particular ecclesiastical intervention through the proliferation of parish cinemas, and of notices posted on the doors of the churches with indications on “honest” and “dishonest” films. “What remedies should be applied?”, asked Fossati, and stated laconically “after the huge war we hoped that the people would repent: but on the contrary...”.⁴⁶

In a context which was still Christian in character and exhibited as such through the reassuring reporting of baptisms, religious marriages, and administration of sacraments, where civil rites such as cremations and lay funerals were present only episodically, the tools that the bishops identified for the intervention of the Church were those of mass mobilisation: the Missions of Fr. Riccardo Lombardi⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Venice 1956, no. 16.

⁴⁵ On this aspect, the repertoire is very wide: in Mantua “often the same mothers accompany their daughters to dances so that they can marry them on this occasion” (1946, no. 92) here the female religious orders “take care that adolescents are instructed in Christian doctrine and led to the Christian life; but they experience not a few difficulties because of dancing, entertainment, shows and other similar things” (1956, no. 91). In Turin “the catechesis of children goes well; but for adults it seems to be more difficult to impart it: sports, cinemas, excursions and dances, especially in the afternoon, distract the faithful” (1951, no. 74); the patriarch of Venice, in 1951, informs that in the ecclesiastical region “with regard to cinematography, it was established by the Bishops’ Conference to set up an interdiocesan cinematographic centre and an inspection commission in Padua” (1951, no. 100). The initiative to establish a “Diocesan cinematographic centre” was also taken in Mantua (1956, no. 96). On the approach to cinema by the Catholic Church of Pius XII, see della Maggiore, “Guerra alla guerra”.

⁴⁶ Turin 1951, no. 84.

⁴⁷ In Mantua “during the month of June 1948 almost thirty thousand men for a whole week gathered in the city squares to listen to [his] excellent sermons” (1951, no. 84), those of the ‘Crusade of goodness’ anticipating the ‘Mission for a better world’ promoted on the recommendation of Pius XII.

and that of the “Pro Civitate Christiana” of Don Giovanni Rossi,⁴⁸ the Marian pilgrimages⁴⁹ and devotions, above all for the jubilee of the Holy Year and for the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary Virgin. Furthermore, they stressed the necessity of intensive catechetical instruction, which was mostly entrusted to associations of lay people who were strictly controlled by the hierarchy – even here the laity was ultimately assigned a subordinate role.⁵⁰ The same is true for the new associations that were created to cope with the changing conditions of the world of work, from ACLI (Associazioni Cristiane Lavoratori Italiani) to ONARMO (Opera Nazionale di Assistenza Religiosa e Morale degli Operai) to CISL (Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori): the reports shall ensure their full functioning to the extent that they are placed under the control of the hierarchy. Precisely the case of the “free trade union” of the CISL indicated some flaws: “The Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori, which we have formed with our hands, is strong, but it seems to me that secularism is gradually penetrating”.⁵¹ From this point of view, Patriarch Roncalli’s initiative to promote a “Theological School for the Laity” acquired a singular and isolated character.⁵²

At the conclusion of this first rapid overview of the *relationes ad limina* of some Italian dioceses, the question remains about the issues on which the Italian bishops do not report. Obviously, it is not possible here to establish whether this is a voluntary silence or an inability to analyse. First of all, this concerns the absence of any reflection about the twenty-year period of fascism and its implications on the level of institutional relations between the fascist regime and the Catholic hierarchy.⁵³ However, on closer inspection, a sort of regret for the past seems to emerge, for example in Umbria, where the bish-

48 The same report of Mantua also mentioned the activity of 38 missionaries; Patriarch Roncalli recalled the mission of the same “Pro Civitate” in Venice and Mestre in 1955 (Venice 1956, no. 75).

49 In Mantua “the annual city processions of the venerated relics of the Precious Blood of Christ in Parasceve and Corpus Domini and the Blessed Virgin Crowned” (1951, no. 84), in Agrigento “the solemn *Peregrinatio Mariae* as it is called, and various Eucharistic Marian Congresses” (1953, no. 84).

50 The bishop of Città della Pieve reassured that “all members of these associations are docilely subject to the direction and guidance of the ordinary and the Apostolic See” (1956, nos. 94-95); in addition to the Catholic Action, there were “the Confraternities, the Pious Unions, the Associations called ‘Daughters of Mary’, Company of S. Luigi, of S. Agnese” (Mantua 1956, no. 84).

51 Agrigento 1958, no. 94.

52 Venice 1956, no. 75.

53 “Manipulation of history” is the expression used by Daniele Menozzi to explain this self-absolving attitude of the Catholic hierarchy after World War II. See Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*, 143; see also the conclusions of Ceci, *L’interesse superiore*, 316-22.

op did not fail to underline how “the customs of the people, for which our country was a prosperous country, due to the war and spread of [communism] have declined quite a bit”;⁵⁴ in Venice, on the other hand, Cardinal Piazza warned of the “grave danger against good morals, due to the license induced by a misunderstood freedom, from which the means of perversion multiply and corruption is rampant”.⁵⁵

A second aspect which does not appear in the reports sent to the Consistorial Congregation concerns the frictions and polarisations within the Catholic Church after World War II, all those underground movements that agitate it and that will emerge only during and after the council: the tensions within the organised laity, in particular the delicate matter of the resignation of the leaders of the Youth of Catholic Action,⁵⁶ the ambiguous relationship between Catholic Action and Civic Committees, to which only the Bishop of Mantua Antonio Poma quickly refers to, but only in 1956 – therefore, already in a climate different from the frictions of 1948-53 –, the ideas for renewal in the areas of liturgy,⁵⁷ biblical studies, catechesis, ecumenical dialogue.⁵⁸ The Italian dioceses of the second post-war period as they are presented by their bishops are still monolithic.

The self-critical observations remain on a superficial level: Poma noted that “there is no lack of some [priests] endowed with such a spirit as to question ecclesiastical obedience”, although this seems to include only forms of external transgressions such as smoking, excessive use of motorcycles or cars, reading “secular” newspapers, attending cinemas. Perhaps, some timid reference can be found in places where experiments in the liturgical field are made with the introduction of the “children’s mass” or interventions in places of worship aimed at facilitating the participation of the faithful⁵⁹ or in the field of catechesis.

The *relations*, therefore, seem to describe a situation which, if not fully under the control of the ordinary, is at least substantially

54 Città della Pieve 1946, no. 84.

55 Venice 1947, no. 100. See Caponi, “Il grave errore del nostro secolo”.

56 See Piva, *La gioventù cattolica in cammino*.

57 See the summary of Grillo, “Culti e liturgie cristiane”.

58 See Zizioulas, “Dalla divisione alla ricerca dell’unità”.

59 This is the case of the Basilica of Saint Mark in Venice, characterised by the Byzantine style that provides for the presence of plutei aimed at separating the presbytery and the main altar from the rest of the basilica; on the initiative of Patriarch Roncalli, “supported by strong arguments [...] and with almost universal consent”, a solution of hinges was identified in order to lower the “screens that intertwine with the iconostasis placed at the entrance to the presbytery” in order to allow “the view of the altar of Saint Mark, and consequently of the sacred rites that are performed in the chapel, so that the group of faithful, who are present in the nave, who regret not being able to see anything that happens to the altar, may participate with attention and devotion to the sacred mysteries” (Venice 1956, no. 61; see Niero, “La questione dei plutei”).

compact and free from situations beyond the strength and authority of the bishop: errors against faith, for example, are in fact absent,⁶⁰ for the most part the sanctions are limited to disciplinary violations.

At the same time, the responses of the Consistorial Congregation, mainly aimed at encouraging or, at least, justifying the limits of the governmental action of the bishops, seem to respond to the need to maintain a formal balance in which the controller (the Consistorial Congregation) and the controlled (the bishops),⁶¹ who are appointed by the Roman Curia of which the same controller is a part and who speak a common language, are reflected in a mirroring effect.

In conclusion, the reading of the *relationes ad limina* of the Italian bishops after World War II, albeit limited to a few cases, seems to confirm what Giovanni Miccoli already intuited: the analyses and interpretations of the Italian bishops correspond to models and cultural schemes widely prevalent and settled in the Italian ecclesiastical world.⁶²

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⁶⁰ The reference to Modernism, for example, to deny its presence in the diocese, appears more a homage to the form of the questionnaire than the manifestation of a concrete possibility.

⁶¹ The Consistorial had "personal and complete jurisdiction over the Bishops", see Dieguez, "Governo della Chiesa e vigilanza", 586.

⁶² Miccoli, "Chiesa, partito cattolico, società civile", 377-8.

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