

The US Catholic Church after World War II: Reflections on the *relationes ad limina* (1949-54)

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Abstract The article analyses the content of the *relationes ad limina* submitted to the Vatican by US bishops between 1949 and 1954. These documents shed light on the episcopate's views and actions during the second post-war period, emphasising the growth of the US Catholic Church and its gradual advance within the US society as a relevant religious force. The US bishops' main concerns appear to be secularism (or indifferentism), their competitive relationship with Protestant denominations, the educational system, and the use of new media, such as radio and television. The racial question also emerged.

Keywords Catholic Church. US Catholicism. Pius XII. Relatio ad limina. US dioceses.

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Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2022-10-13
Accepted 2022-11-10
Published 2022-12-13

Open access

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Citation Ciciliot, V. (2022). "The US Catholic Church after World War II: Reflections on the *relationes ad limina* (1949-54)". *JoMaCC. Journal of Modern and Contemporary Christianity*, 1(2), 321-342.

DOI 10.30687/JoMaCC/2785-6046/2022/02/007

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1 Introduction

The pontificate of Pius XII (1939-1958) represented a turning point in the history of the relations between the Holy See and the United States of America.¹ For the most part, recent historical scholarship has chiefly highlighted its diplomatic and ideological aspects, emphasising with varying nuances how the rapprochement between two ‘powers’ – a moral one, the Holy See, and a cultural, political, economic and military one, the United States – was largely due to the geopolitical situation of the second post-war period and the beginning of the Cold War. For example, Philippe Chenaux argues the existence of this strong convergence and sums it up in three points: the search for a just and lasting peace (1942-46), the need to defend the West against communism (1947-51), and the building of a united Europe (1952-57).² Differently, American scholars such as John T. McGreevy or Leslie W. Tentler focuses more on the American side of the story, debating both the developing Catholic and the developing American identity of US Catholicism, showing how deeply Catholics influenced American society and speaking about a ‘public Catholicism’ in the post-war era.³

Historiography has confirmed the establishment and dynamics of this somehow ‘privileged’ relationship between the Vatican and the United States during the Pacellian pontificate.⁴ However, the specific resource of *relations ad limina* underlying the present essay can add an inside look at US Catholicism, partly confirming developments already known, but, more importantly, restoring, almost bringing to life again, the direct voices of the US bishops and their views on the management of the local churches after World War II.⁵ In fact, previous scholarship has neglected this documentation as a valuable tool to study the US episcopate and its worldview in its relationship with the Vatican.

This article aims to contribute to the major thesis that Catholics moved into the American political, cultural and social mainstream in the 1930s and especially 1940s, becoming an effective force in the

¹ Historiography has already explored several aspects, especially the diplomatic ones: Regoli, “La diplomazia papale: un percorso storiografico”. See also, Chenaux, “Il Vaticano, gli Stati Uniti e l’Europa”. For a broader view of post-war America see Carnes, *The Columbia History of Post-World War II America*.

² Chenaux, “Il Vaticano, gli Stati Uniti e l’Europa”, 65-6.

³ McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, particularly chs. 6-7; Tentler, *American Catholics*, particularly chs. 11-12.

⁴ Di Nolfo, *Vaticano e Stati Uniti*; Castagna, *Un ponte oltre l’oceano*; D’Alessio, “The United States and the Vatican”. See also Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade*.

⁵ The quinquennial visit *ad limina* is the required visit of diocesan bishops to Rome, to meet the pope and to report on the state of their dioceses via a detailed questionnaire. See Ricciardi Celsi, *Le ‘relations ad limina’: aspetti della esperienza storica*, and Menozzi, “L’utilizzazione delle “relations ad limina” nella storiografia”.

public arena in the 1950s. The US Catholic answer to this change was often anguished and definitely complex. Some sought to retain the insularity of the old Catholic ghetto and subculture, for it provided an easy lineup of ideological and confessional enemies. Others, however, sought assimilation, even overcompensating by boasting of their patriotism and ideological fervour in combating national foes, especially those on the left. McCarthyism, named after the Catholic Senator from Wisconsin, has often been interpreted in precisely this light. Cardinal Francis J. Spellman, a prominent figure in this era, operated in this vein as well. These two responses were never mutually exclusive, and US bishops' voices from the *relationes ad limina* need to be seen in this precise context.

Both church leaders and longtime confessional adversaries, mostly Protestant, were forced to adapt to this new situation. From a US Protestant perspective, it was precisely this convergence of Catholicism with the American political, cultural and social mainstream which caused such consternation in Protestant ranks, particularly among liberal Protestants who saw the official pronouncements of Catholic bishops, as analysed below, against materialism and secularism as a particular threat. Protestant leaders perceived Franco's Spain and the success of Christian Democracy in the Italian elections of 1948, along with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's appointment of Myron Taylor as 'personal envoy' to Pope Pius XII and the large Catholic presence in the New Deal coalition (just to mention a few examples) as attempts by the Catholic Church to weaken the separation of church and state, a key component of United States legal thinking since the country's origin. This recurring tension between US Catholics and Protestants is another element that the *relationes ad limina* clearly show.

A general historical overview of US Catholicism in the period will be followed by an analysis of a few relevant themes that emerged from a selected sample of *relationes ad limina* between 1949 and 1954, the post-war timeframe recently made available for consultation at the Vatican Apostolic Archives. From a methodological point of view, since it was impossible to analyse the *relationes ad limina* of all US dioceses because of their large number (121 in total), a sample was chosen that was representative on the one hand, in terms of the diverse geography of the country (in order to cover as much territory as possible), and on the other hand, for historical relevance (priority was given to the most important dioceses in terms of size and influence, namely the urban dioceses of the Northeast and Midwest of the country).⁶ In

⁶ After World War II, the East Coast dioceses retained a primatial position, including the diocese of Washington, D.C., created in 1947, and the diocese of Chicago in the Midwest. The Catholic presence in areas such as Oklahoma (*relationes* of Oklahoma

examining this documentation, common issues appeared along with regional specificities within a shared understanding of the situations that US bishops faced, suggesting a sort of cause-effect narrative of what American Catholicism experienced in that period.

2 Historical Overview

US Catholicism experienced an extraordinary expansion after World War II, mostly due to the economic prosperity that the entire country enjoyed beginning in the second half of the 1940s. In the period between 1945 and 1965 there was a 90 per cent increase in the number of Catholics in the country, from 23.8 million to 45.6 million, due both to a population boom and also, though to a lesser extent, to conversions. The number of bishops grew by 58 per cent, clergy by 52 per cent, women religious by 30 per cent, and seminarians by 127 per cent.⁷ This increase was also visible in the wider utilisation of the country's physical space through the construction of new churches, schools, hospitals: for example, there were 123 new hospitals run by Catholic agencies, 3,005 new schools, from elementary to high schools, and 94 new colleges. Consequently, the enrolment of Catholics in the educational system up through the highest levels also mushroomed: the increase was 3.1 million, more than 120 per cent in total, and it was around 300 per cent at colleges and universities.⁸ However, it should be noted that no more than 50 per cent of the Catholic population had access to higher education.⁹ These numbers tell us not only of an increased geographical advance but also of cultural, social and political advances on the part of US Catholics, who were emerging in US society no longer as a religious minority, but as a majority group, which was able to carry its own weight in terms of producing an alternative culture to the historic Protestant one.¹⁰

and Tulsa) or Georgia (*relatio* of Savannah-Atlanta) was smaller and so was the influence of the local Catholic Church. As few examples: in Tulsa there were 73,186 Catholics out of 2,336,434; in Savannah 28,994 out of 3,250,000 (in 1950); whereas in New York 1,260,328 out of 4,900,000 and in Boston 1,283,232 out of 2,934,548.

⁷ Statistical data from Carey, *Catholics in America*, 93 (taken from the *Official Catholic Directory* from 1945 to 1965).

⁸ From 92,426 to 384,526, mostly due to the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the 'GI Bill', a law that provided a number of concrete aids to war veterans, in particular giving subsidies to families to pay for universities, graduate schools and training programs. The relative low cost of Catholic education at that time was also another factor. Carey, *Catholics in America*, 93; Tentler, *American Catholics*, 280.

⁹ Carey, *Catholics in America*, 94.

¹⁰ Already in the last decade of the nineteenth and, to a much greater extent, in the first decade of the twentieth century, Catholics were the country's second-largest religious group (and as Christians they even belonged to the largest religious group alto-

From the pastoral letters of the US episcopal magisterium of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s emerged the urgency of the reconstruction of Christian culture in the United States and the Western world through various means, including veritable moral crusades against two historical evils identified by the episcopal hierarchy as the most pernicious: communism and secularism.¹¹ The damage caused by these two 'dangers' could be seen in the context of the family (divorce, abortion, and birth control causing disunity and instability), in the public entertainment industry (materialism and sexual promiscuity), in public education (through disconnection from religious values), in the economic order (*laissez faire* on the one hand and totalitarian socialism on the other), in the American courts that legislated without regard to religious values, and finally even in the political order, where natural law was not assumed, nor even contemplated.

This was the period in which the US Catholic Church – as the revival churches had already done and as the fledgling neo-evangelical group headed by Billy Graham was doing at the time – pointed confidently to an ideal link between America and Christianity, and particularly between America and Catholicism, which legitimised cultural and social interventions such as the crusades against the immorality of the modern entertainment and literature industries or a strong media presence through radio and television programs, or even the battle for Catholic schools. This last aspect was relevant not only because it represented a North American specificity, but also because it characterised the very model of US Catholicism. As a matter of fact, the creation of first-level (elementary and middle) schools in every parish or group of parishes underlined an ecclesiastical strategy of evangelisation – within a society that was strongly religiously competitive on the one hand, but also strongly a-religious on the other – in the organization of a public education system, which conceived education as a fundamental place from which to re-Christianise the country and strengthen the ranks of the Catholic Church.

While in the 1920s and 1930s the bishops opposed federal aid for public schools because they feared increased state power, from 1944 onward they supported federal aid for Catholic schools, particularly in depressed and poor areas, reversing the trend and becoming the promoters of a campaign with political features that several Protes-

gether). Although the concept of minority is used in several Catholic sources and literature, it is quite controversial, particularly because the basic definition of 'minority' refers to any group that constitutes less than 50 per cent of the total population. Certainly, 'minority' is not only a statistical question. Here I use the term 'minority' in a loose, non-technical manner.

¹¹ Carey, *Catholics in America*, 93-114; Chinnici, *American Catholicism Transformed*, 28-35. See also the pastoral letters of the US bishops of this period in Nolan, *Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops*.

tant churches perceived as an attack on the legislative principle of separation of church and state.¹²

The greater economic advances of US Catholics, who moved out of ethnic enclaves to become citizens of the upper and middle classes, also gave rise to numerous associations, both religious and lay, capable of raising funds and supporting missionary, charitable, and cultural action projects (an example was the Society for the Propagation of the Faith (SPF) under Fulton Sheen's direction between 1950 to 1966, which became a national force within US dioceses). This phenomenon also involved a process of suburbanisation/pluralisation that represented a driving force able to deeply modify Catholicism in the United States.

In connection with the already mentioned cultural, political, and economic factors was racial segregation. In the southern United States, it was a *de jure* situation, but black Catholics in the north experienced a *de facto* segregation as well when they were separated into parishes and schools intended only for them.¹³ There were attempts among the Catholic laity to effect change. Both the Southeastern Regional Interracial Commission (SERINCO) and the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) worked to eradicate legalised southern racism, but with limited success. Mostly, the church hierarchy remained silent on racial issues during these decades, thus contributing to an atmosphere of systematic discrimination. In Chicago, Cardinal Mundelein implemented a policy of effective segregation beginning in 1919 that continued until the 1950s, while Joseph Elmer Ritter in St. Louis, Missouri, and O'Boyle in New York desegregated their dioceses in 1947 and 1948 respectively, albeit amid protests. All the other dioceses desegregated only after 1954, the year of the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, and it was not until 1958, after the formation of the US Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) that the bishops published a pastoral letter dedicated to the issue of religion and race (*Discrimination and the Christian Conscience*, on 14 November 1958).¹⁴

3 The US *relationes ad limina* (1949-54)

The analysed *relationes ad limina* fit into this historical context. Any understanding of the growth of the Catholic Church in the United States has to take into account the fact that the US is a very large, heteroge-

¹² See, for example, Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*.

¹³ Suffice is to think about the journalist book written by John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* in 1961.

¹⁴ Nolan, *Pastoral Letters of the United States Catholic Bishops*, 201-6. See Carey, *Catholics in America*, 106-8 and Chinnici, *American Catholicism Transformed*, 84-104.

neous ecclesiastical territory, with substantial differences not only geographically – larger dioceses and smaller dioceses, urban dioceses and rural dioceses – but also economically, socially and, above all, religiously. In fact, the Catholic presence has developed in very different ways among the various geographical, economic and social areas.¹⁵ Considering that, the analysis of the *relatio ad limina* source illuminates more vividly and confirms that the Catholic Church overall was thriving, and in some cases booming, in the country in the post-war period, as witnessed by the construction of new churches, seminaries and parochial schools, the many donations for good works, the growing number of lay associations for the evangelisation of different social sectors, and priestly and religious vocations. We see a Catholic Church that occupies more and more space within the social, political, and also economic landscape of the nation, especially in the East Coast (for example, Washington, D.C., New York, Philadelphia, Boston). The documentation confirms the extension of the era of ‘triumph’ for Catholic education in the country, the consequent formation of a strong Catholic intellectual leadership and the definitive move ‘from the margins to the centre’ from a social, cultural and political point of view.¹⁶

The most influential dioceses were also ruled by prominent figures in US Catholicism at the time, with some visibility even outside Catholic and US borders: Cardinal Samuel A. Stritch (1887-1958) in Chicago, Cardinal Francis J. Spellman (1889-1967) in New York, Cardinal Patrick A. O’Boyle (1947-1973) in Washington, D.C., and Cardinal Richard J. Cushing (1944-1970) in Boston. This is certainly relevant given the fact that the country held no Catholic majority, preserved the tradition of more or less latent tensions between Christian denominations, and had been based since its foundation on the separation of state and churches. Thus, it proclaimed itself a-religious, in a way foreign to the European tradition and certainly not desired by the Catholic magisterium of the time.¹⁷

From the consulted *relationes ad limina* common themes that cut across geography and history have emerged: 1. the relationship with the Protestant world (i.e., Catholicism vs. Protestantism); 2. secularism (also identified as indifferentism, materialism, liberalism, or even ‘material humanism’); 3. the role of Catholic education; 4. the use of modern media: radio and television; 5. the racial question (i.e., the management of black communities; black people are called *nigritae* or *nigritas* in Latin and, at that time, *nigriti* in Italian).

¹⁵ See the digital map here: <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Media/index.html?app=Map&appid=8d8afe7a04db4a14ad48c1a841012cfd>.

¹⁶ Tentler, *American Catholics*, 266-82.

¹⁷ Think about the Jesuit John Courtney Murray’s vision in “Religious Liberty: The Concern of All”, among his many other writings on this topic.

3.1 Protestantism and Materialism

In a number of *relationes ad limina*, the Catholic relationship with Protestants and with indifferentism/secularism are often seen through the same lens and are perceived as closely related. In the view of US Catholic bishops, secularism is often rooted in the “Protestant heresy”, or, in other words, the Protestant vision is the bearer of religious indifferentism and a dangerous secularism that unfortunately influences American Catholics as they are continually exposed to it as a minority presence. The attitude toward Protestantism is one of strong criticism, using a fully pre-conciliar language and conceptualisation: it is a heresy that dangerously influences faithful Catholics, who must resist it at all costs. As will be seen below, the US bishops advocate Catholic religious education as part of the solution, for only through a primary and secondary school education that takes Catholic values into account can the influence of Protestants and secularised society be stemmed.

An example of this worldview is seen in the questionnaire answer number 100,¹⁸ sent in 1949 by the Cardinal Stritch of Chicago (1887-1958):¹⁹

Errors and Dangers: As is well known in these places, material humanism affects the minds and hearts of many more widely and more broadly. Social institutions are debilitated by secularism and souls are in ruins. Indeed, life itself is governed for many by materialism and falls into confusion either by atheism or agnosticism. The majority of non-Catholics profess God and worship Christ with confused minds, but in practice do not recognise religion as the ruling power in life. The greatest confusion prevails among Protestants, and they are the ones who act just as strongly against the Church. Pernicious errors are not uncommon in public newspapers and journals. Although Communism counts few means to spread nefarious direct and indirect propaganda, it fights against the Church.²⁰

¹⁸ On the questionnaire see the Editorial of this special issue. Question no. 100 is the last and only open question.

¹⁹ From 1930 to 1939 Samuel Alphonsus Stritch served as archbishop of Milwaukee. Upon the death of Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago, Stritch was appointed his successor in March 1940. He remained in Chicago until 1946. In March 1958 he was appointed pro-prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, becoming the first American cardinal to be entrusted with the leadership of a congregation of the Roman Curia. He died in Rome on 26 May 1958, before assuming his duties. See <https://web.archive.org/web/20080518020950/http://www.archmil.org/bishops/Bishop-Stritch.asp>. On Catholicism in Chicago see Avella, *This Confident Church*.

²⁰ Chicago 1949, 100: “Errores et pericula: Uti notum est his in locis humanismus materialis latius latiusque mentes et corda multorum capit. Instituta socialia saecularismus debilitantur et in ruinam animarum vertuntur. Imo apud multos ipsa

Interestingly, the expression “material humanism” (also translated as “secular humanism”) becomes a container in which to place nearly all the “errors and dangers” that the cardinal fears: atheism, agnosticism, secularism, communism, and Protestantism, thus bringing into alignment the whole genealogy of modern errors conceived by intransigent Catholic thought.²¹

A more articulate discourse is found in the thought of Cardinal Spellman (1889-1967), archbishop of New York, who was an exponent of Catholic conservatism, a supporter of the foreign policy of the US government of the time, and a figure close to Eugenio Pacelli – with whom he had worked in Rome between 1925 and 1932, before being appointed archbishop of New York in 1939.²² In the analysis of his ecclesiological and pastoral vision, he reiterated anti-Semitic language in his pairing of a Jewish rabbi and a Protestant pastor who both seduce Catholics with erroneous doctrines – “sectae Protestanticae his affectae sunt pestibus et complures, ministri protestantici et rabbi iudaici ita seducti sunt ut ipsi loquacissimi propugnatores facti sunt illarum formidolosissimarum doctrinarum” (Protestant sects were affected by these plagues, and several Protestant ministers and Jewish rabbis were so deceived that they themselves became the most eloquent champions of those most frightening doctrines).²³ He also includes with them issues related to the traditional family (and its disintegration) and broader biopolitical issues (divorce and euthanasia). In the archdioceses of Boston, New York, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, abortion and onanism also emerged. Spellman described in detail the work of the Catholic Church as the sole champion in the country’s religious landscape against divorce and against euthanasia, particularly against the Euthanasia Society of America, which in the 1940s was pushing for legislation to allow voluntary euthanasia under certain conditions.²⁴

vita materialismo regitur et sive atheismo sive agnosticismo in confusionem cadit. Major pars acatholicorum Deum profitentur et etiam confusis mentibus Christum adorant sed de facto religio tanquam dominantem vitae potentiam practice non recognoscunt. Inter protestantes maxima confusion obtinet et sunt ii qui contra Ecclesia pro viribus agunt. Apud diaria publica et in ephemeridibus perniciosi errores non raro divulgantur. Licet Communismus paucos numerat ope nefariae propagandae directe et indirecte contra Ecclesiam dimicat”. All translations from Latin in the text are by the Author.

21 Along the same lines was Bishop John Joseph Mitty’s 1954 *relatio*: “grave errors such as liberalism and Protestantism” (San Francisco 1954, 69).

22 Biographical notes on Spellman in Carey, *Catholics in America*, 236-7.

23 New York 1949, 16.

24 New York 1949, 16. The congregation note to the 1949 Kansas City *relatio ad limina* is also given on divorce: “La diocesi però è una di quelle che sembra sia servita al Delegato apostolico come esempio, quando stendeva il suo rapporto, e diceva che nelle diocesi americane degli Stati Uniti non si predicherà mai abbastanza contro il divorzio che dagli acattolici pare stia per passare anche ai cattolici non infrequentemente” (Kansas City-St. Joseph 1949; originally in Italian) (However, the diocese is one of those that seems

A broader overview helps us put this concern into context. The Euthanasia Society of America (ESA) was founded in New York in 1938 with the goal of gaining social and legal acceptance of the ‘right’ to kill certain human beings (people whom the social organisation called “mentally deficient” or “incurable”). In 1939 the ESA attempted to legalise euthanasia through a legislative proposal for ‘voluntary’ euthanasia, but it failed.²⁵ In the beginning, the euthanasia movement grew out of eugenic assumptions, rather than the concept of free choice. It was also partially related to the Planned Parenthood Association of America (PPFA), founded in 1916 by Margaret Sanger as the American Birth Control League (in 1942 it became PPFA) to promote birth control in the United States. In Brooklyn, New York, Sanger had also opened the first contraception clinic.²⁶ In fact, it would be a group of members of the American Eugenics Society and members of the American Birth Control League who formed the ESA.

Here it is interesting to note how the archbishop first tied the two issues, euthanasia and divorce, together as part of a single project intent on demolishing Christian morality, but we also note his emphasis that the Catholic Church alone stood firmly against such ‘dangers’. Aside from any rhetoric, it is from these years onward that the US Church was to make biopolitical issues a strong identity aspect, especially for the more conservative Catholics: against contraception (permitted by several Protestant denominations), against abortion (permitted under certain circumstances in several Protestant denominations), against any form of attack on the traditional family, such as divorce (permitted by the majority of Protestant denominations).

The development of an American Catholic identity is a perennial theme. The evolution of the Catholic identity in contrast to Protestantism, or better, within a composite Protestant land, is a phenomenon that had occurred since the origin of the country (as it had throughout the nineteenth century in several European countries),²⁷ and that the development had created peculiar forms (Americanism is the most well-known example).²⁸ In the second half of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church in the United States assumed an identity of its own, being no longer a mere recipient of inputs from Rome and Europe but also itself a key global and powerful actor. The new public visibility achieved by the US Church, the convergence with

to have served the Apostolic Delegate as an example when he drew up his report, and said that the American dioceses in the United States will never preach enough against divorce which from non-Catholics not infrequently seems to pass also to Catholics).

25 See <https://all.org/euthanasia/euthanasia-history>.

26 See Williams, *Defenders of the Unborn*, 10-38; Baker, *Margaret Sanger*, part. 127-58.

27 Most notably in Germany. See Blaschke, *Konfessionen im Konflikt*.

28 Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*.

the US government and the geopolitical stance of the Vatican in the post-war period all influenced this process: the strong anticommunist attitude is just the most public example. Just as the conservative political and religious forces converged on biopolitical issues at the beginning of the 1970s – think of the Moral Majority –, yet another new aspect of the US Catholic identity was added to the already complex scenario, while still drawing on forces already present in the immediate post-war period, as the *relationes* clearly show.

Spellman is only one prominent example of the pervasive worldview shared by other national episcopates of the time, and the magisterium as well: that of a Catholic Church under attack by “liberal” and “emancipated” enemy forces. These forces were making inroads because of people’s indifferentism, and even included references – which in 1949 appeared unfortunate given the tragic events of World War II – to the so-called Jewish-Protestant “powers”:

In the absence of firm dogma and no present leadership capable of exercising authority, the powers of Protestants and Jews became powerless to recruit and guide their faithful, or to oppose the impulse of religious indifferentism and moral inertia of any kind. It is not uncommon for their leaders to form the vanguard of the enemy, exchanging ‘liberal’ and ‘emancipated’ ideas with each other. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of them, aware of these damaging things, skilled and bold, deprived of a sense of justice, as well as deprived of a healthy example of good behaviour, reject all moral restraint in their daily lives and descend to the lowest level of deterioration. Clear and manifest evidence of this destructive doctrine appears in abundance in almost every secular newspaper edition. However, it is not only the number and frequent repetition of those crimes that strike a sensitive spectator; but the manner in which these things are received by the people, who seem indifferent, strikes us with great apprehension.²⁹

²⁹ New York 1949, 84: “Deficiente qualicum stabili dogmate et duce non praesente, qui auctoritatem exercere posset, potestates Protestantismi et Iudaismi factae sunt impotentes ad conducendos et dirigendos suos fideles vel ad opponendam impetui indifferentismi religiosi et inertiae moralis qualemcumque ordinatam resistentiam. Non rare ipsi eorum duces primas acies inimicorum efformant, inter se ipsos in jactandis “liberalibus” et “emancipates” ideis aemulantes. Quam ob rem nihil mirum est, ut multi eorum, conscientia hisce nocuis notionibus obtuse, peritis et audacibus ad assequendam iustitiam ducibus orbati, necnon salubri boni exempli effectum privati, omnem morale moderationem in eorum vita cotidiana reiciant et ad infimam depravationem corruant. Huius perniciosae doctrinae indicia conspicua manifesta que in omni fere editione ephemeridum saecularium abundanter apparent. Attamen non solum numerus et frequens repetitio horum criminum spectatorem sensibilem percutiunt; sed indifferens apparetur modus, quo a populo haec recipiuntur, nobis magnum metum incutit”.

Such an adverse position against modern society undoubtedly would have found good ears in the Vatican, since it was expressed in different ways by Pope Pius XII himself.

3.2 Catholic Education

Another relevant theme that emerges from the *relationes ad limina* is that of the importance of Catholic education, a decisive issue in the debate between church and state in the United States ever since the nation's origins. The US bishops perceived schools as an indispensable battleground. Once the possibility of receiving public funds or incorporating religious teachings into public schools was shelved, the Catholic hierarchy opted for the erection of parochial elementary and middle schools and later Catholic high schools and colleges.

The 1950s were the decade of the greatest expansion of Catholic schools, which would then bring about in the 1960s the remarkable growth in the level of education of US Catholics and their repositioning at higher social levels. All the consulted *relationes ad limina* report the establishment of new parochial schools, which never seem to be sufficient in number, and almost all of them stress their strategic importance.

However, a phenomenon that would have enormous repercussions in more recent times was already looming: the need to have members of religious congregations available for teaching, usually members of women's congregations, who were able to teach in schools at a lower cost than what was needed to pay lay staff.³⁰ In fact, in the post-conciliar years, when female religious vocations drastically decreased, the parish-based schools entered a severe economic crisis, and the entire system that had been deliberately formulated in the 1940s and 1950s started to weaken. Archbishop Stritch of Chicago thus testified in 1954:

Although schools have been provided in the best way, new and larger ones are needed and required. The number of religious teachers does not fulfil the needs for teachers, and therefore Catholic lay teachers are called upon to assist. The burden of paying the salaries of these lay people is truly severe and in some cases almost insurmountable. Add the enormous amount of money needed these days for the construction of new schools. This is the greatest difficulty. Without Catholic schools among us, children are exposed to serious dangers. It must be said that so far this situation is going very well, with the cooperation of the faithful, but we pray the Blessed Virgin for the future that the number of reli-

³⁰ Brian, *Into Silence and Servitude*, ch. 1.

gious vocations will grow and that there will be new schools and additions for the schools already in place. The number of students in our schools is increasing year by year.³¹

Archbishop Cushing of Boston also repeatedly spoke of the need for educational resources.³² He was known, in fact, for his effective fundraising aimed at financing education, charitable works and missions, and was particularly appreciated in Roman circles for his “great work in schools and churches”.³³ In his diocese in 1954 he noted how nearly half of Catholic children attended Catholic schools and how the schools attracted more and more students because of their increasingly high quality of education. In proposing Catholic education, whether by Catholic schools – the preferred solution – or provided by Catholic teachers enrolled in public schools (not to teach catechism, though), Cushing stresses its importance as a remedy for secularism: “est quaestio quae solvenda est solummodo per augmentum continuatum in spritualitae, praedicatione et in diffusione doctrinae spiritualis” (is [was] a problem which must be solved only by a continuous increase in spirituality, preaching and dissemination of spiritual doctrine).³⁴

We can also glimpse between the lines the change in US society’s perceptions of Catholics during this period – “ex mutatione in mente eorum officialium” (change in the mentality of (governmental) officials).³⁵ All were aware of the gradual waning of suspicion and mistrust toward a church that until recently had been perceived as a minority, as belonging to the economically disadvantaged social strata, and as foreign to American culture.

31 Chicago 1954, 100: “Licet pro viribus scholae provisae sunt, novae et ampliores requiruntur et requirentur. Numerus docentium religiosarum necessitatibus non est par ideoque docentes laicae catholicae in adiutorium vocantur. Onus solvendi stipendia horum laicorum vere grave est et in quibusdam casibus ferme insuperabile. Addatur ingens summa pecuniarum his diebus necessaria pro aedificandis novis scholis. Est difficultas maxima. Sine scholis catholicis apud nos. pueruli gravibus periculis exponuntur. Dicatur hucusque haec res cum cooperatione fidelium optime progreditur sed pro futuro Beatam Virginem precamus ut vocationes religiosae numero crescent et media pro novis scholis et additamentis pro scholis iam erectis proveniant. Numerus discipulorum in nostris scholis de anno in annum crescit”.

32 Richard James Cushing served as archbishop of Boston from 1944 to 1970 and he was made a cardinal in 1958. Carey, *Catholics in America*, 197.

33 Congregation note, Boston 1954: “molte nuove sia chiese sia scuole. Metà dei ragazzi vanno nelle scuole cattoliche. Per gli altri, è stata fatta una convenzione con l’autorità civile affinché nei giorni e nelle ore di vacanza possano assistere al catechismo in chiesa (90,100)” (originally in Italian).

34 Boston 1954, 100.

35 Boston 1954, 100.

3.3 The Use of the Media

The convergence of Catholicism with the values of American society, or, better, the “Americanization” of the Catholic Church, can also be seen in the early use, compared to other local churches, of “modern” media to evangelise more effectively. Radio and television were on several occasions mentioned as useful tools for spreading the Catholic message.³⁶

In 1954, Archbishop Spellman in New York mentioned, though only briefly, Fulton Sheen, who for two decades, from 1930 to 1950, hosted the popular evening radio program *The Catholic Hour* for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), later moving to television with *Life Is Worth Living* (1951-1957) and *The Fulton Sheen Show* (1961-1968).³⁷ The faithful who “versantur inter materialismum qui his temporibus proprius est tamquam viridis oasis christianae virtutis et amoris” (live[ed] in the midst of materialism, which in recent times is [was] considered a green oasis of Christian virtue and love), found “lucem, solatium in eius verbis reperierunt” (light and comfort in his words):

It is difficult to estimate how much good this series [Sheen’s programs] has already accomplished or will have, but forecasters agree that it will contribute greatly to religion and serious thinking. In order to make the best use of these means, it seemed appropriate to entrust a priest with a special task of organizing our broadcasting and telecommunications services. To these the priest prepares and shows the things we wish to do by means of these arts, and consults with the Catholic television and radio stations themselves. They have been strongly influenced by these arts.³⁸

³⁶ As examples, Boston 1954, 100; New York 1954, 100.

³⁷ Bibliographical notes on Fulton Sheen in Carey, *Catholics in America*, 233-4. See also Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, 82-101.

³⁸ New York 1954, 100. “In rebus moralibus et spiritualibus fideles esse securiores videntur. Versantur inter materialismum qui his temporibus proprius est tamquam viridis oasis christianae virtutis et amoris. Frequentius autem viri prudentes uniuscuiusque religionis confitentur Dominium et Onnipotentiam Dei, et semper plures cives studium et operam ad res religiosas convertunt. Optime ominari possumus ex eo quod magis ad religiosa argumenta attenditur in potentissimis et mediis radiophonii et teleoramatis. Abhinc biennio Reverendissimus Dominus Fulton Sheen, Episcopus Auxiliaris noster, seriem contionum per teleorama habuit quae libentissime exauditaee sunt fructusque multos religioni attulerunt. Illum multa decies centena milia et nullius et cuiuscumque religionis per hebdomadas audiunt, et instructionem, lucem, solatium in eius verbis reperierunt. Quantum boni hac serie iam evenerit vel proventura sit difficile est aestimare, sed omina consentiunt eam religioni et gravi cogitationi summopere prodesse. Eisdem mediis ut plenissime utamur providum nobis visum est sacerdotem operi speciali Archiocesano praeponere qui actus nostros radiophonicos et teleoramicos ordinareret. His sacerdos ea quae per has artes facere volumus parat et exhibit, nec non ipsis societatibus radiophonicis et teleoramaticis de rebus catholicis consulit. Magni adducti sunt ut ad has artes sese conferant”.

It is clear that there is a growing awareness of the potential of such tools and also a strategy not to leave their use to whim or chance. Certainly, coexistence alongside other Protestant churches, which had already been using radio and television for some time – one thinks of Billy Graham and the hundreds of local radio stations broadcasting Sunday morning Protestant services – had also been a catalyst of no small importance. However, the use of such new media, which were more prevalent in the more urbanised and industrialised parts of the country, should not be generalised. As an example, in the diocese of Savannah in the 1950s, evangelisation by mail was still being used: “corsi di catechismo ‘postali’ per cui il maestro manda in scritto ai lontani la spiegazione e il discepolo risponde in scritto le sue osservazioni (84)” (postal catechism courses whereby the teacher sends the explanation in writing to remote people and the student responds by writing his remarks (84)).³⁹

3.4 The Racial Question

Another issue, already partly studied by historiography,⁴⁰ that emerges from a relatively few *relaciones ad limina*⁴¹ is the “questione nigritae” or racial question. The date that arguably represented a turning point in this issue was 1954, the year of the aforementioned Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education*, which has been described as the moment that galvanised the modern civil rights movement. After years of protests, led initially by black students and their parents at Molton High School in Virginia, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) filed five lawsuits challenging the *de jure* segregated school system nationwide; these lawsuits were later combined in what is known as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional. Thus, any mention of the so-called *nigritae* prior to 1954 chiefly demonstrates a rather traditional view, namely, that of a white missionary attitude toward African American communities, similar to the attitude of the time toward other indigenous peoples such as the Native Americans, and, in fact, describes a parish-wide system of segregation. The diocese of Savannah is a case in point.

³⁹ Congregation note, Savannah 1954.

⁴⁰ See Davis, *The History of Black Catholics*; McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*; Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic*; Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*; Cressler, *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic*; Johnson, *One in Christ*; Newman, *Desegregating Dixie*; Pasquier, “Catholicism and Race”.

⁴¹ New York 1954; Washington, D.C. 1954; Chicago 1954; Savannah 1954.

Bishop Gerald Patrick A. O'Hara (1895-1963)⁴² in his 1954 *relatio ad limina* mentioned a parish created for a black community, thus taking for granted the *de jure* segregation that existed within his diocese, if not the common mindset of considering black people inferior human beings. The typewritten note in Italian summarizing the *relatio* says "per i Nigrity, che da alcuni sono stimati quasi razza inferiore, [il vescovo] ha istituito anche un ospedale" (for the 'nigrity', who are considered by some as almost an inferior race, he also established a hospital).⁴³

However, we see something different in the first *relatio ad limina* of the newly formed (1948) diocese of Washington, D.C. In 1954. Archbishop O'Boyle (1896-1987)⁴⁴ was taken to point out that, in the Catholic schools of his diocese, black boys and girls were accepted. What is more, he added, not without some pride, this same attitude was then practised, following the example of the Catholics, even in public schools by government decree.⁴⁵ He also asserted:

When it was recently decreed by the Supreme Court that 'segregation', which selects children in public schools on the basis of their colour, is against the law, many black men flocked here. On the other hand, many of the Caucasian ancestors moved to Maryland and Virginia counties, where so far few blacks can be found. Years ago, in 1948, the Ordinary, so to speak, outdid the Supreme Court's decree and directed that in the future no discrimination should be made, regardless of colour of the archdiocese's elementary schoolchildren. [...] The Catholic University of America has been accepting blacks since 1935. When the Supreme Court decree was promulgated in May last month, all the secular newspapers praised the Church because the Catholic Church had been admitting blacks to its schools for some years.⁴⁶

⁴² Biographical notes of Gerald Patrick O'Hara in <https://web.archive.org/web/20101124220419/http://diosav.org/files/archives/S8924p05.pdf>.

⁴³ Congregation note, Savannah 1954. See also New York 1949, 3.

⁴⁴ On his life see MacGregor, *Steadfast in the Faith*, part. 166-97.

⁴⁵ Washington, D.C. 1954, 100. In answer no. 2 it is also specified that there were eight parishes composed of black people but they could choose to attend any church in the diocese: "et octo paroeciis pro Nigitis quia hae Ecclesiae sitae sunt in districtibus quos incolunt maxime Nigrity; integrum est autem Nigitis quamlibet Ecclesiam in Archidioecesi extantem frequentare".

⁴⁶ Washington, D.C. 1954, 100: "Cum nuper decretum fuerit a Summo Tribunali 'segregationem', quam vocant, puerorum in scholis publicis, ratione coloris, contra leges esse, plurimi nigrity huc confluunt. E contra vero multi e genere Caucasio in Comitatus Marylandiae et Virginiae transmigrant ubi pauci hactenus inveniuntur nigrity. Inde ab anno 1948 Ordinarius quasi decretum Summi Tribunalis praevertens, decrevit nullum in posterum faciendum esse discrimen puerorum, ratione coloris, quoad scholares Archidioecesananas elementarias. [...] Universitas vero Catholica Americae inde ab anno

In this way the diocese of Washington, D.C. asserted its position in the vanguard of civil rights. It is interesting to note, however, that in Chicago, which was considered a kind of laboratory for civil rights, there was no mention of the racial issue in the *relationes ad limina* (except in terms of numbers, i.e., how many black people lived in the diocese),⁴⁷ whereas in the diocese of Savannah Bishop O’Hara paternalistically described a *de facto* segregated church.⁴⁸

4 Conclusions

In conclusion, in the case of the US, the *relatio ad limina* source for the most part helps to confirm developments in US Catholicism already partly outlined by historical studies, but in addition mirrors the pervasive tone of the reflections of the diocesan bishops. In the *relatio*, Rome forced the ordinaries to answer a long and detailed questionnaire, which sometimes did not fully probe the reality and issues they themselves were experiencing. The questionnaire reflects Roman priorities over the priorities of local churches, and not vice versa. This often makes the *relationes* sound somewhat pedestrian and lacking in creativity. Still, some US bishops took the task seriously. What emerges as the strongest concerns are: 1) opposition to secularism (more than to communism), and especially to the attack on the family and the biopolitical sphere; 2) the focus of attention on Catholic education as a means of evangelisation of American society, though still with a view of competing against Protestant denominations and more generally against indifferentism; 3) and, complementary to Catholics’ numerical growth, the strategic and thoughtful use of modern media, such as radio and television, to establish a church presence in increasingly relevant public spaces.

1935 nigritas patet. Cum decretum Summi Tribunalis proclamatum fuit, mense Maio proxime praeterito, ephemerides saeculares omnes hoc Ecclesiae laudi verti voluerunt quod Ecclesia Catholica iam aliquot ante annos nigritas in scholas suas adimisset”.

47 Answer no. 3 in both Chicago 1949 and 1954.

48 Savannah 1954, 100: “In partibus meridionalibus Statuum Foederatorum Americae Septentrionalis, uti bene notum est, Nigri generatim ab “albis” despiciuntur et tamquam cives “secundae classis” tractantur. Dolendum est nonnullos catholicos, qui nati cum sint in regione meridionali, haereditasse ab avis suis hunc spiritum” (In the southern parts of the United States of America, as is well known, black people are generally looked down upon by the “whites” and they are treated as “second class” citizens. It is unfortunate that some Catholics who were born in the southern region, have inherited this spirit from their ancestors).

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