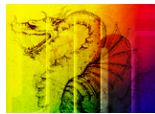


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Human Rights and Decolonization in the
Missionary Journal of the Salesians
(1945-1978)

by
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Human Rights and Decolonization in the Missionary Journal of the Salesians (1945-1978)

Mauro Forno *

The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen forced even the Catholic Church to tackle the theme of human rights. But not until the pontificate of Leo XIII we see some partial opening, and it was to take the dictatorships and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century for there to be a further elaboration. The Second Vatican Council produced documents of a certain importance, among which the Dignitatis humanae that expressed an essential principle for missionary work (the subject of this brief article): true religion had to be put forward as testimony, hence without damaging the “rights of others”. In the Catholic missionary environment many of these problems found their natural terrain of expression. Since the end of the Council, the world of the missions above all was to find itself facing a strong crisis of identity: tensions, contradictions, and impulses which naturally found a broad echo in the pages of the Catholic missionary press, of which the Bollettino Salesiano was an interesting expression.



The outbreak of the French Revolution and the promulgation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* forced even the Catholic Church to tackle the theme of human rights.¹

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¹ For a general overview, Daniele Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani. Legge naturale e modernità politica dalla Rivoluzione francese ai nostri giorni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

As far as its leadership was concerned, Pius VI accepted the *Declaration* while pointing out its areas of weakness and criticizing the principles which inspired it, in line with the principle that the rights of men do not coincide with those of God.¹

The same line was repeated in the decades that followed by his successors, and so it was not until the end of the 19th century and the pontificate of Leo XIII that we see some partial opening, in particular in relation to *economic, social* and—only in perspective—*human rights*, which still, however, derived from natural law, established by God with the aim of achieving his kingdom.

It was to take the dictatorships and totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, therefore, for there to be a further elaboration, with the recognition that individuals have *absolute rights*, even though these individuals are not recognized as *men* but as *human persons*, created in the image of God.²

After the end of the war, pope Pacelli did not formally express himself in public on the new and fundamental 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Authoritative figures did, however, beginning with “La Civiltà Cattolica”, which recognized in the *Declaration* the bases for protecting the human person from the point of view of international law, albeit identifying its fundamental weakness in the absence of a “sacred character”, which could render these safeguards a reflection of the divine order.³ For this reason too, while the commission charged by the United Nations with preparing the declaration was carrying out its task (not without the participation the Catholic world, above all in America),⁴ the Church of Rome supported the—failed—attempt by an international group of intellectuals to elaborate a “Catholic charter” of the rights of man.⁵

¹ Luigi Fiorani and Domenico Rocciolo, *Chiesa romana e rivoluzione francese. 1789-1799* (Roma: École Française de Rome, 2004); Dan Edelstein, “Christian Human Rights in the French Revolution”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79, no. 3 (2018): 411-426.

² See for example Donald J. Dietrich, *Human Rights and the Catholic Tradition* (New Brunswick-London: Transaction, 2007); Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Emma Fattorini, *Pio XI, Hitler e Mussolini. La solitudine di un papa* (Torino: Einaudi, 2007).

³ Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*, 167-169.

⁴ Joseph Samuel Rossi, *American Catholics and the Formation of the United Nations* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1993), 177-191.

⁵ The initiative, which arose in the context of the *Conversaciones católicas internacionales* (an institution created at the end of 1934 and the beginning of 1935 thanks to the bishop of Vitoria, Mateo

The first explicit reference to the *Declaration* of December 1948 came from John XXIII and his encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963). In it the pope expressed the hope that the UN could work in such a way that all human beings might be able to find “an effective protection as to the rights that arise immediately from their dignity as people”, “universal, inviolable, inalienable”.¹

These were important statements, which also allowed the pope to strengthen his denunciations of the violation of rights perpetrated by the communist regimes, first expressed in a radio message on 29 October 1958.



The subsequent Second Vatican Council produced documents of a certain importance. The constitution *Gaudium et spes*, devoted to the relationship between the Church and the contemporary world, though it did not manifest a direct interest in the 1948 *Declaration*, praised, for example, the international institutions that had attempted to organize peoples on the basis of law and justice, and referred explicitly to *human rights* and the *fundamental rights of men*, the definition of which, however, could still only be given by God. The declaration *Dignitatis humanae* expressed an essential principle for missionary work (the subject of this brief article): *true religion* had to be put forward as testimony, hence without damaging the “rights of others”.²

The approval by the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1967 of a convention on economic, social, and cultural rights and one on civic and political rights was greeted with renewed favour by the Holy See, which

Múgica y Urrestarazu), was taken up—with the support of the Francoist government—in July 1947 by bishop Carmelo Ballester y Nieto, according to a line clearly suggested by the pope; Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*, 172 and ff.

¹ Vincenzo Ferrone, “Chiesa cattolica e modernità. La scoperta dei diritti dell’uomo dopo l’esperienza dei totalitarismi”, in *Chiesa cattolica e modernità*, ed. Franco Bolgiani, Vincenzo Ferrone and Francesco Margiotta Broglio (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), 69-93.

² http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_it.html

also took part in the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the 1948 *Declaration*. In the apostolic letter *Octogesima adveniens* of May 1971, Paul VI made an explicit reference to the progress made in the “enunciation of the rights of man and in the search for international agreements for their application”, even though he did not fail to evoke the absoluteness of *natural law*, to which it was always necessary to refer.¹

If, on the one hand, this did not prevent the pope from accepting the new culture of human rights on the basis of which he could criticize authoritarian regimes of any tendency, it conferred to his teaching, on the other hand, a right of veto over a whole series of questions with respect to which no declaration was, for the Church, able to give full guarantees: from the sphere of sex to matrimony, the family, and bioethics.



1. Human rights and missions

The delicate process summarily described above did not fail to affect Catholic missionary environment, where many of these problems found their natural terrain of expression. It was indeed precisely in the field of missionary work that the Church’s new interest in the rights of peoples and culture could be effectively expressed, rights that were cited as early as the Atlantic Charter of 14 August 1941 and then expressed in a more complete fashion in the *Declaration* of 10 December 1948.

These documents served to increase the awareness in many populations, which up until then had been placed under colonial rule, of their own rights. In

¹ Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*, 227.

the light of new international horizons, powers which for centuries had dominated in substantial parts of the planet could no longer claim to do so without taking some account of the rights of others.

This perspective was not devoid of effects in the sphere of evangelization either, which was naturally different from, but historically connected to that of political colonization.¹ Indeed, in the space of a short period of time, the ecclesiastical hierarchies found themselves having to tackle a series of problems that could not be delayed, in order to avoid squandering the fruits of missionary activity that had lasted for centuries.

The challenge clearly opened up complex—and to a certain extent unprecedented—scenarios, both as to the new relationships that had to be created with the states that aspired to independence, and for the debate with cultures which had up until then been considered inferior or, at best, marginal.

Faced with these scenarios, the hierarchy of the Holy See attempted on one hand to support the rapid evolution of the international political context, and to anticipate its effects on the other.² In particular, within the various positions of the Vatican curia, there were significant openings towards themes of the “new evangelization” (we can think of the perspective of “inculturation” or the promotion of the indigenous clergy), precisely while among many Western bishops,³ within the religious orders and congregations and among the very missionaries working in the field on the other hand, those same perspectives tended to arouse little interest, if not decisive opposition.⁴ It is enough to think of the words of Piero Gheddo, as late as 1956, not before he had observed that the harm caused by the Western colonizers had been far less than the “innumerable benefits” they brought, even in the sphere of the defence of the rights of the person:

¹ Alba Rosa Leone, “La politica missionaria del Vaticano tra le due guerre”, *Studi storici* 21, no. 1 (1980): 179-209.

² Josef Metzler, “Tätigkeit der Kongregation im Dienste der Glaubensverbreitung 1922-1972”, in *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide memoria rerum*, vol. 3/2, 1815-1972, ed. by Josef Metzler (Rom-Freiburg-Wien: Herder, 1976), 575.

³ Piero Gheddo, *La missione continua. Mezzo secolo a servizio della Chiesa e del terzo mondo* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2003), 56.

⁴ Agostino Giovagnoli, “Pio XII e la decolonizzazione”, in *Pio XII*, ed. Andrea Riccardi (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1985), 180; Andrea Riccardi, *Il secolo del martirio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), 348-354.

[I]n a few centuries, often in a few decades, immense regions moved from barbarities or backwardness to a notable degree of civilization (...). It is fashionable nowadays to speak of colonialism for its real or presumed misdeeds, and we no longer remember the positive balance of its work. (...) It has made peace reign where there was war, unity where there was disunion, order where banditry or looting reigned. It has brought principles of the equality of all men before God, the principles of the right of all to life and to work.¹

For most of the 1950s many missionaries remained convinced, therefore, that the colonial system had not reached the end of the line and that many of the indigenous population still wanted to be able to count on a certain type of “aid” from the whites. This perspective, in missionary lands, was often put forward by a missionary generation that had barely reflected on the more recent forms of evolution on the themes of human rights and civil society or on some of the developments put forward by Catholic thought in the theological and pastoral field.²

While, that is, authoritative members of the hierarchy of the Holy See gave proof of having grasped the need for change in the areas of the so-called *Third World* (where it was necessary to gain credit as protagonists of a new mission which was not only spiritual but also moral, and as bearers of values—peace, development, human rights—which had a frankly universalistic flavour), different missionary congregations and many missionaries showed themselves reluctant³. A sort of asymmetry was expressed in this way between the positions of principle and their concrete application, especially in peripheral areas, where the Christian future of the great territories was being played out.

Only at the beginning of the 1960s and above all after the end of the Second Vatican Council, could the Churches of some areas which were at the time “peripheral” compared to the European and north American Catholic centre, demonstrate they had risen to the challenge of adapting the Gospel to a planet

¹ Piero Gheddo, *Il risveglio dei popoli di colore. Un nuova epoca nella storia della Chiesa* (Bologna-Milano-Parma-Torino: Emi, 1956), 9-36.

² Fidel González Fernández, “Storia della Chiesa in Africa. La formazione delle chiese africane (1914-1965)”, in *Storia della Chiesa*, vol. 24, *Dalle missioni alle chiese locali (1846-1965)*, ed. Josef Metzler (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni Paoline, 1990), 176.

³ On these themes, see Mauro Forno, *La cultura degli altri. Il mondo delle missioni e la decolonizzazione* (Roma: Carocci, 2017).

in rapid transformation¹. In Latin America some bishops proposed interesting perspectives, which often went beyond the openings of the Holy See in the field of missionary work, expressing the desire for a different reading of the Gospel. The African and Asian bishops began in turn to claim their own right to difference, bluntly putting forward the problem of whether there should still be a *single way* of being Christians².

During the Second General Conference of the bishops of Latin America in Medellín, from 26 August to 27 September 1968, and following the emergence of the suggestions of *Liberation theology*—partly influenced by the proposals of economists and sociologists on the themes of “dependence” and “underdevelopment”—the whole hegemonic Western model was called into question. In the light of these new perspectives, it was by now the oppressed who were to become the principal interlocutors of theology and pastoral care, with a church that would have to make a great effort to overcome its characteristics of great paternalism. The relationship with the oppressed could not only be established on a reference to love. It had, on the contrary, to involve many other themes, starting with those of justice and *rights*.³

As a reflection of Medellín and other subsequent conferences of the Latin American episcopate, in Europe in particular the debate—fuelled by post-Council reflections—on the option for the poor, religious freedom, the protection of ethnic and cultural minorities, and human rights was enriched with new forms of mobilisation and dialogue. At the same time, the international reputation of innovative bishops (such as Hélder Câmara and Manuel Larraín) grew, together with that of other significant figures such as the Chilean priest Segundo Galilea, the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire and above all the Peruvian theologian and priest Gustavo Gutiérrez.

In various countries, lay associations and movements—created after the 1967 encyclical *Populorum progressio* and stimulated by the renewal produced by the Council, but also by the protests of 1968—began to combine purely religious

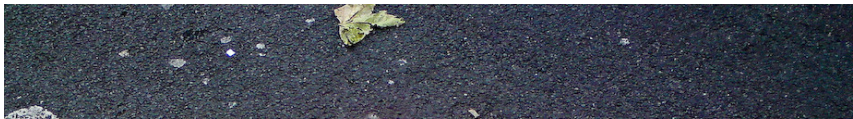
¹ Joseph Komonchak, “La lotta per il Concilio durante la preparazione”, in *Storia del Concilio Vaticano II*, vol. 1, *Il cattolicesimo verso una nuova stagione*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995), 204.

² Achiel Peelman, *L'inculturazione. La Chiesa e le culture* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1993), 61-65.

³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teologia della liberazione* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1972); Jean-Marc Ela, *Fede e liberazione in Africa* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1986), 112.

needs with some innovative political, humanitarian and cultural trends, proposing models of development aimed at overcoming the mechanisms of dispossession to the detriment of Third World countries: all tangible dimensions of a new Catholic universalism, capable of coming to terms even with the paternalism typical of an old way of interpreting missionary action.¹

As for the explicit admission by the Church hierarchy of its responsibilities in this old approach to the missions (little respect for the rights of the peoples of the “South of the world”), a particularly significant date was to be 12 March 2000, when, during the great Jubilee of the new millennium, repeating what he had previously said (in Assisi on 27 October 1986 and in Santo Domingo on 13 October 1992, for example, but also during a general audience on 21 October 1992), John Paul II publicly asked God to forgive the “past and present sins of the children of the Church”, identifying among these sins all the acts perpetrated “against love, peace, the rights of peoples, respect for cultures and religions”.²



2. The Vantage Point of the *Bollettino Salesiano*

If we analyse the objections raised in the years of the Council and those immediately after by many representatives of the missionary orders and congregations to the process of transformation set in motion by the Holy See, we have the distinct impression of substantial disorientation.³ One problem above all hovered in the background, without receiving a satisfying response: if, as it

¹ Massimo De Giuseppe, *L'altra America: i cattolici italiani e l'America latina. Da Medellín a Francesco* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2017), above all 5-14; 100-107; 148-180.

² Cfr. http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/ns_lit_doc_20000312_prayer-day-pardon_it.html.

³ On these aspects too see again Forno, *La cultura degli altri*, 68-74.

seemed to emerge from the new orientation of the Council, starting from the constitution *Lumen gentium*, every people could “save itself” through its culture and its faith (and if, therefore, doubts started to insinuate themselves as to the principle of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*), what could be the sense of continuing to *carry out missions*? Naturally, the decree *Ad gentes* stressed that the Church was missionary by definition and that the missionary characteristic was inscribed in ecclesiastical ontology. The new guidelines put forward by Vatican II did not seem, however, to provide fully convincing answers as to what should be understood exactly by *mission*. Since the end of the Council, almost unexpectedly, the world of the missions above all was to find itself, therefore, facing a strong crisis of identity: tensions, contradictions, and impulses which naturally found a broad echo in the pages of the Catholic missionary press, of which the *Bollettino Salesiano*¹ was an interesting expression.

A monthly publication founded by Don Bosco in 1877, not principally devoted to missions but with a significant part of it dedicated to them, the *Bulletin* offers an invaluable vantage point both because, in the period after the second world war, the Salesians were present in all five continents (with a number of male and female religious, cardinals, lay co-operator bishops, educational and aid projects of considerable importance), and because the congregation had always claimed to have a “natural vocation” to adapting to the times.² To this we can add, as a circumstance certainly not of secondary importance, the possibility of having all the issues of the periodical in digital form, which allows systematic and extremely refined research from which to extract certain information and facts.

It is worth observing in the first place that, from its inception in 1877, only in March 1936 did the expression *human rights* appear for the first place in the

¹ We have consulted the Italian edition.

² This prerogative the Salesians would also stress during their 19th and 20th General Chapters (Rome April-June 1965 and June-January 1971-2), first referring to the “spirit of adaptation” which had always characterised “le origini e lo sviluppo dell’opera di Don Bosco, il quale ha inteso precisamente rispondere alla varietà delle esigenze dell’apostolato giovanile e popolare, nella molteplicità delle situazioni [the origins and development of Don Bosco’s work, who intended precisely to meet the variety of needs of the youth and popular apostolate, in the multiplicity of situations]”; then stating the not “static but dynamic” nature of the constitutions and regulations, “mutabili riguardo al modo di vivere, pregare, agire, governare, così da permettere la vitalità, lo sviluppo, l’adattamento ai tempi”; cf. https://www.sdb.org/it/SDB_Risorse/Capitoli_Generali.

pages of the periodical (an expression used however in a decidedly incidental way, referring to the caste system in India).¹ A second reference to the expression appeared the following year,² but we have to wait another twelve years for another fleeting reference (remembering the figure of the Salesian cardinal, August Hlond, archbishop of Warsaw and primate of Poland),³ and another eight before we find another, inside an article on the duties of Salesian co-operators.⁴

These are significant facts, which become almost surprising if we refer to the years that followed, considering the importance taken on by the theme in the meantime during the pontificate of John XXIII. Only as from 1962, the year in which the Council began, did the periodical (led by don Pietro Zerbino from 1951 to 1972, the year in which Teresio Bosco was appointed) show an interest in the topic which was not merely episodic⁵ and only in January 1965—in an in-

¹ In March 1936, the year in which the French philosopher Jacques Maritain—who made a consistent effort for the development of human rights within the Catholic universe—published his *Humanisme intégral* (cf. Daniele Lorenzini, *Jacques Maritain e i diritti umani. Fra totalitarismo, antisemitismo e democrazia 1936-1951* [Brescia: Morcelliana, 2012], 88-92; Samuel Moyn, “Jacques Maritain: le origini dei diritti umani e il pensiero politico cristiano”, in *Dialogo interculturale e diritti umani. La Dichiarazione Universale dei Diritti Umani. Genesi, evoluzione e problemi odierni 1948-2008*, ed. by Luigi Bonanate and Roberto Papini [Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008], 97-124), the *Bollettino salesiano* (henceforth *SB*) published an article in which we read: “Gandhi, il patriota indiano, si è fatto l’apostolo della redenzione dei Paria. (...) Ma le porte rimasero sbarrate, finché venne l’ultima mossa. Il dottor Ambedkar, appartenente agli Intoccabili, con lo studio e la perseveranza seppe acquistarsi una posizione decorosa nella vita e si fece difensore dei diritti dei Paria. In quest’anno, nel congresso generale dei Paria in Bombay, parlò a lungo sugli sforzi fatti per ottenere invano i più semplici diritti umani [Gandhi, the Indian patriot, made himself the apostle of the redemption of the Pariahs. (...) But the doors remained barred, until the last move came. Dr. Ambedkar, belonging to the Untouchables, by study and perseverance was able to acquire a decent position in life and became an advocate for the rights of the Pariahs. In this year, at the general congress of the Pariahs in Bombay, he spoke at length on the vain efforts made to obtain the simplest human rights]”).

² The article refers to the papal encyclical *Ingravescentibus malis*, in which Pius XI addressed those who had “insorti a rinnegare e a vilipendere l’eterno Iddio, a tendere insidie alla fede cattolica e alla libertà dovuta alla chiesa, a ribellarsi infine con sforzi insani contro i *diritti divini ed umani*, per mandare in rovina e perdizione l’umano consorzio [risen up to deny and vilify the eternal God, to lay snares against the Catholic faith and the freedom due to the church, to rebel finally with insane efforts against *divine and human rights*, to lead the human consortium to ruin and perdition]”; (cf. “Ricorriamo a Maria. Lettera Enciclica del Santo Padre Pio XI sul Santo Rosario”, *SB* 11 [1937]: 245).

³ “La morte del secondo Cardinale Salesiano Em.mo card. Augusto Hlond”, *SB* 23 (1948): 214.

⁴ “Un apostolato che deve trovarci compatti”, *SB* 22 (1956): 434.

⁵ Cf. “Il problema della scuola alla consulta dell’apostolato dei laici”, *SB* 11 (1962): 188; “I vescovi

terview with the Salesian cardinal Raul Silva Henriquez, archbishop of Santiago in Chile—did it take an explicit stance on Catholic renewal in the field of the rights of the *human person* and on other fundamental perspectives for a Church that aimed to be a protagonist in the Third Millennium:

We cannot remain behind (...) The Council is setting an example. The reform of society on more Christian and more just bases is a matter of urgency which cannot be put off. If we do not do it ourselves, others will, and it will not be for the good. And then we cannot let social good be promoted only by the sons of darkness, with dictatorial systems which trample freedom and the rights of the human person. We Christians must live with our heads held high and firmly and boldly tackle the enterprise of Christianizing a world which is moving fast, which asks for and demands justice, which claims a legitimate wellbeing for everyone and which aspires to live and serve God in peace.¹

Only during the last year of the Council, in the light of directions endorsed by the supreme collegiate organism of the Church, almost as if it were a need imposed by circumstances, did the *Bulletin* start to give a certain importance to the theme of human rights and the role of the United Nations. As we can read in the November 1965 issue:

the world has lived its longest day, enclosed within two transoceanic flights (...) “Wherever the gatherings of peoples unite to establish the rights and the duties of man”, Paul VI wrote in his first Encyclical, “we are honoured, when they let us, to be among them” (...) The presence of Paul VI at the UN was the greatest acknowledgement that the great gathering received in the course of its history, in a juxtaposition expressing the mission of the Church (...) The moral hospitality that the Church offers the UN and that the UN offers the Church gives this meeting great significance, inaugurating a new epoch in the collaboration between the forces of the spirit and temporal forces.²

The following month, an article entitled *Il volto della Chiesa al chiudersi del Concilio* [The face of the Church at the end of the Council] again mentioned

d’Italia ai cattolici”, *SB* 7 (1963): 109; “La ‘Pacem in terris’ di S.S. Giovanni XXIII”, *SB* 11 (1963): 182; “Filmati i nostri tempi in una profezia di Don Bosco”, *SB* 23 (1963): 402; “L’educazione cristiana dei figli: dovere e diritto della famiglia”, *SB* 24 (1963): 99.

¹ “Fermenti cristiani nell’America latina”, *SB* 1 (1965): 12.

² “Una pagina nuova nella storia del mondo”, *SB* 21 (1965): 329.

the UN, “authoritative” seat where the pope had agreed to meet “the world of today”:

the Council turned its attention to the grave problems of today’s humanity: racism, underdeveloped countries, nuclear weapons, peace, conjugal love, responsible parenthood, culture, the rights of the man of this new society. Four historical journeys by John XXIII and Paul VI have marked the works of the Council, translating its essential aspects: Loreto-Assisi (...); Jerusalem (...); Bombay (...); New York, the renewed meeting with the world of today in its most authoritative seat, on the most burning issue, peace. An itinerary that the Church renewed by the Council has traced in the paths of the sky in order to bring men of our tormented time the new and the old message of the Lord.¹

The most significant intervention was probably that published in the June 1966 issue, in preparation for the International Congress of the Apostolate of the Laity. Quoting the text of an article by don Giulio Girardi, teacher at the Salesian Pontifical University and scholar of Marxist thought, the *Bulletin* put forward some far from banal observations on the theme of the Church *in a state of dialogue*:

1. Two problems: a) Christianity is an original religion, superior to the others; but, on the other hand, full of values that are common to other religions and also non-religious ideologies; b) Christianity is the communication of the truth and objective values which impose themselves on man; but at the same time, it is the promotion of man and more fraternal relations among men (...)

2. Two attitudes: a) The integralist model. For [it] the Church is an organism closed in on itself and in a polemic with others (...)

b) The personalist model. The search for common values.

1. It stresses what unites: values rather than disvalues, truth rather than errors; 2. It defends the rights of man before the rights of the Church (...)

3. It is aware of the historical nature of religious and moral truth, hence it admits the possibility of a renewal, albeit in a way that is faithful to divine tradition. Hence it is open to dialogue. In this second model there is a danger, but there are also

¹ “Il volto della Chiesa al chiudersi del Concilio”, *SB* 23 (1965): 361. A year and a half later there was the reminder that an “ex allievo salesiano [a former Salesian pupil]”, the Belgian August Vanistendael, had “rappresentato il movimento sindacale cristiano internazionale all’Onu [represented the international Christian trade unions at the UNO]”, taking a “parte importante nella redazione della Dichiarazione [important part in drafting the Declaration]”; cf. “Un ex allievo membro della Pontificia Commissione ‘Justitia et Pax’”, *SB* 7 (1967): 23.

new possibilities (...). It is a new style of relationship that entails a new, more mature, more adult, face of Christianity.¹

Precisely the awareness that this approach could guarantee Christianity a new face, but also brought with itself more than a few dangers to the Church, produced a degree of uncertainty in the periodical, with calls to renewal alternating with calls to tradition, in line with the positions also expressed by the Salesian congregation during the general chapters of the thirty years from 1947-1978.²

The July 1966 issue stressed that the council documents expressed “a two-way movement”: on one hand a warning for purification from any compromise with the temporal, on the other the wish to see an increasing “movement of presence” and commitment “in the building of an earthly city distinguished by broader and more mature truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom”: all prescriptions that Catholics were held to respond to by re-affirming the primacy of spiritual values, without scorning earthly values. The “legitimate and proper distinction between sacred (...) and profane” could not “lead to the abstract and violent disjunction of the two worlds”. It was necessary “not to clericalize the profane” and “not to profane the sacred”, in order to avoid emptying modern life of its “soul” and “inner lymph”. It was necessary, in other words, to move in a complex equilibrium never forgetting that *the rights of the human person* came before *human rights*.³

Of some interest was also the attempt by the periodical to backdate the attention that several figures of reference in the world of the Salesians had for human rights to the period before 1948, almost as if to reduce the emphasis on the acceptance of some to the steps forward taken by the Council. As it happened, for example, in June 1968, in a worried analysis of the climate of political uncertainty that was agitating the world:

Two billion men want to break free of the circle of misery. America and Africa are in flames for equal rights for all races. (...) Revolution is invading Asia and Latin America, like the last desperate attempt towards a finally human development. (...) Giovanni

¹ “Il ‘dialogo’ nel nostro apostolato”, *SB* 12 (1966): 53.

² See in particular the acts of the 18th (1958), 19th (1965), 20th (1971) and 21st chapters (1978), where the expression *human rights* was never mentioned.

³ “L’anima del mondo”, *SB* 13 (1966): 5.

Bosco, this priest hypersensitive to the needs of his age, (...) invites us at the threshold of the world of the year 2000 to listen to the profound appeals of our age, to make our contribution to the ferment which is agitating and fermenting the world.¹

The same approach was taken in September 1973, in the report of the missionary experience of Maria Troncatti (consecrated Figlia di Maria Ausiliatrice, beatified in 2012), active in Ecuador since 1925;² or, again, in March 1976 in a new reference to the teachings of don Bosco, proposed by the Rector Major Luigi Ricceri:

A century ago, when the word “colonialism” did not cause a crisis or protest, the nations of the West held it legitimate to indiscriminately exploit the lands over which they had raised their flag, Don Bosco “felt” the great social, economic and political problems together with the fundamental problems of evangelization. He understood then that the world was moving towards a total evolution of its values and an equally severe revision of the respective rights of men and peoples.³

It was an attempt which, besides re-affirming the topical nature of Salesian pastoral care and pedagogy in the light of the new indications on human rights, also seemed to parry the blows from some criticism that the congregation had received because of certain forms of rigidity and excesses of zeal shown in its missionary work. We must not forget here, that as from the end of 1973, the plan for the second Russell Tribunal on repression in Chile, Brazil, and America Latina had taken shape.⁴

¹ “Strane luci in una catacomba di cemento armato”, *SB* 11 (1968): 10.

² According to the *Bulletin* Troncatti had always taught the native population “che tutti siamo uguali davanti a Dio, che tutti abbiamo dei diritti fondamentali che debbono essere rispettati [that we are all equal before God, that we all have fundamental rights that must be respected]”; cf. Pietro Ambrosio, “Dentro l’Oceano verde”, *SB* 17 (1973): 26.

³ Luigi Ricceri, “5 caratteristiche delle missioni salesiane”, *SB* 5 (1976): 8-9.

⁴ It is worth remembering, for example, the *condemnation* inflicted later in 1980 on the Salesian Congregation, precisely during the 4th session of the *Russell Tribunal*, with specific reference to the evangelization of the Rio Negro for having, from 1915 onwards imposed a radical detribalization on the indigenous peoples and used educational methods that bordered on “ethnocide” and “genocide”. On this delicate issue, the “Civiltà cattolica” expressed itself; cf. Giovanni Rulli, “Brasile: le difficoltà dello sviluppo”, *La Civiltà cattolica*, 3136 (1981): 403-406.



In conclusion, for the *Bulletin* the lines on which to base the new perspective were apparently clear: accelerate “reform of the social structures” through “a peace whose progress begins with the development of peoples”; search for “social justice as an absolute commitment”; “strive for the rights of men”; and remain faithful “to the teachings of the Founder” on the preference to be given to the “disinherited classes”.¹

On the exact meaning to be given to the word *mission*, however, there seemed to remain many uncertainties. Not by chance, the theme was explicitly dealt with in October 1973, starting from the positions previously expressed in the missionary journal of the Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere, *Mondo e missione*, by the Jesuit missionary in India Ludwig Wiedenmann. In Wiedenmann’s opinion, mission had taken on two possible variations:

The first says: mission is the proclamation of the Gospel with the aim of converting. (...) The second: mission is service to man, for a life that is more dignifiedly human. Proclamation or service. (...) The first tendency refers back to the missionary mandate of Jesus. (...) The theological premise of this tendency is mainly the conviction that men who do not believe in Christ and do not live in the Church are in grave danger of not receiving eternal salvation. (...) The second interpretation takes its origin from the commandment of Christian love for one’s neighbour (...). This interpretation does not maintain that all men must convert to the Christian faith. The Church, in its view, has the task of serving the rest of humanity altruistically, in the spirit of Christian love, in order to make life on earth more human from every aspect. The theological premise of this second interpretation of mission is diametrically opposed (...). It consists in believing that all men have the same possibility of reaching eternal salvation.

The *Bulletin* took pains to stress that both definitions were present in the documents of the Second Vatican Council:

¹ “Abbiamo visitato le opere sociali dei Salesiani in Colombia”, *SB* 21 (1968): 5.

If mission only consists of the service that the Church altruistically offers other human communities (...), we must say that this mission does not bring the most men the salvation of their life (...). A mission of this kind cannot be the mission of the New Testament, as it does not reach its aim: the renewal of man and human society. (...) However a faith that preached the salvation and full liberation of man, and did nothing to help the oppressed, did not strive to help discriminated races so that their rights be recognized, would lose all credibility, and it would not bring about authentic conversions, which mature above all from contact with the experience of faith.¹

But, as for the doubts as to how the two visions could be integrated in practice, it did not provide any direct answers. Paul VI himself, in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* of December 1975, affirmed some time later that it was important to avoid the very serious risk of depriving the Christian message of its original dimension as a source of “salvation”, abandoning it to the possibility of being manipulated by “ideological systems” and “political parties”.² To show oneself, that is, in the land of the missions simply as *witnesses of the Gospel*, putting forward one’s own faith as a proclamation and as an offer, represented an acceptable perspective, but it could not be the only road to follow. And as to which alternative road should be followed in practice there remained doubts which did much to condition the progress of the journal of a congregation like the Salesians, traditionally attentive to adapting to the times.

With the rise to the pontifical throne of John Paul II in 1978, the horizon partly cleared, at least on themes of human rights. Together with the two terms, ‘evangelization’ and ‘human promotion’, as the main road to follow in the *world of the poor* at that delicate end of the millennium, a concept came back into fashion that attributed to the Church alone the *correct* interpretation of *human rights*. Between the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, though he did not deny the indications of his predecessors, it was not by chance that the Polish pope stressed on various occasions what continued to distinguish the 1948 Charter from the great “tablet of human rights” founded on the order established by God.³

¹ Pietro Ambrosio, “Annunciare il Vangelo o servire i poveri?”, *SB* 19 (1973), 2-4.

² http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/it/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

³ Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*, 244-258.

At the same time, he associated this stance with a request for pardon for the “past and present sins of the sons of the Church”, among which those perpetrated “against love, peace, the rights of peoples, the respect for cultures and religions” stood out:¹ an attempt of notable symbolic significance for a church which aimed to re-elaborate views taken from the Catholic tradition on the basis of a memory which it intended to purify publicly.

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¹ The reference is to the *Day of Pardon* of March 12 2000, during the Jubilee of the Third Millennium; cf. http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/documents/ns_lit_doc_20000312_prayer-day-pardon_it.html.

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