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The relations between the Holy See and the Red Cross: 1863-1963

Jacopo PILI

ABSTRACT: *The relations between the Holy See and the Red Cross were marred by concerns around philosophical stance and prestige. The Vatican perceived the ICRC as a Calvinist body and at the same time a provider of mere material aid. Competition between them arose as early as the Great War. The progressive institutionalization of humanitarian action setting forth on the onset of the XX Century meant that the Red Cross would gain a privileged position in global charity, which the Vatican tried to overcome. While collaboration also took place on several occasions, competition did not cease until after the Second World War, when the Catholic Church obtained formal recognition as a humanitarian “provider” on par with the Red Cross.*

ABSTRACT: *I rapporti tra la Santa Sede e la Croce Rossa furono segnati da preoccupazioni legate all'orientamento filosofico e al prestigio. Il Vaticano percepiva il CICR (Comitato Internazionale della Croce Rossa) come un organismo calvinista e, allo stesso tempo, come un semplice fornitore di aiuti materiali. La competizione tra le due istituzioni emerse già durante la Grande guerra. La progressiva istituzionalizzazione dell'azione umanitaria, avviatasi all'inizio del XX secolo, comportò un ruolo privilegiato per la Croce Rossa nel panorama della beneficenza globale, ruolo che il Vaticano cercò di contrastare. Sebbene non siano mancate occasioni di collaborazione, la competizione non ebbe termine fino alla conclusione della Seconda guerra mondiale, quando la Chiesa cattolica ottenne un riconoscimento formale come “fornitore” di aiuti umanitari alla pari della Croce Rossa.*

A history of the relations between the Red Cross and the Holy See must largely be a history of both cooperation and competition in the field of humanitarian action. This study, drawing from a research strand investigating humanitarian diplomacy, tracks the interactions between these two organisations during a time span of 890 years, from the birth of the Red Cross to the 1960s, demonstrating that they were, while never openly hostile, they were often conflictual and characterised by reciprocal incomprehension and even distrust¹.

¹ The research field focusing on humanitarian diplomacy and its intersection with faith has been steadily growing since the early 2000s. See, for example: KEVONIAN, Dzovinar, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire: les acteurs européens et la scène proche-orientale pendant l'entre-deux-guerres*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2004; PAULMANN, Joahnnes (ed. by), *The Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid: Historical Perspectives in, Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1-31; BARNETT Michael, STEIN, Janice, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012; FREEMAN, Dena, *Religious and Secular Actors in the Emergence of Humanitarianism and Development*, in *Tearfund and the Quest for Faith-Based Development*, London, Routledge 2019, pp. 18-37; MENOZZI, Daniele, *Chiesa e diritti umani: legge naturale e modernità politica dall rivoluzione francese ai nostril giorni*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012; MOYN, Samuel,

The establishment of what would later become the ICRC in the 1860s was received coldly by the Holy See, but also without outright hostility. By the 1860s, when Henry Dunant, after witnessing the battle of Solferino, started the chain of events which led to the Geneva Convention of 1864, charity had become central to organised society, as demonstrated by the proliferation of societies, committees and organisations with the goal of alleviating the suffering, mostly domestically².

1. 1863-1914

The very first contacts between the Holy See and the Red Cross already showed many of the trends that would characterise later relations between the two organisations. In March 1864, Mgr. Giuseppe Bovieri, chargé d'affaires in Switzerland, commented to the Cardinal Secretary of State, Giacomo Antonelli, that:

As Your Eminence sees, it is only a matter of the material care of bodies, without regard to the life-giving breath and health-giving balms of religions. The Catholic Church alone is capable of conceiving and executing the vast institutions for the care of the soul and the body, as it did in ancient times with some of the Orders of Chivalry, with the orders of the Hospitallers and in our times, with the Sisters of Charity³.

Rome perceived the newborn Geneva Committee as a provider of merely material and secular, and therefore inadequate aid, refusing at first to collaborate with this new initiative, repeatedly stating that the Papal States already took care of prisoners of war, including those from “Garibaldi’s hordes”⁴. However, international pressures (especially from the French) and hopes that involvement might christianise the Red Cross led the Vatican to become a signatory to the first Geneva Convention in 1868⁵. After this first joint endeavour, the two organisations remained

Christian Human Rights, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015; PEASE, Kelly Kate, *Human rights and humanitarian diplomacy Negotiating for human rights protection and humanitarian access*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2016. For a comparative perspective on the state of the research, see: O’LEARY MCNEICE, Aoife, «Towards a History of Global Humanitarianism», in *The Historical Journal*, 63, 5/2020, pp. 1378-1389.

² BARNETT, Michael, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 49-51.

³ Istruzioni del Card. Antonelli a Mons. Bovieri, Dispaccio n.3/253 del 9 agosto 1864, in Mgr. Chiarlo, Silloge di documenti che riguardano i rapporti tra s. Sede e Croce Rossa; sia con il comitato internazionale e sia con le società nazionali della Croce Rossa, Asrs, AA.EE. SS., Pio XII, Fondo organizzazioni internazionali, Croce Rossa Internazionale, 3192, pos. 29, ff. 394-834.

⁴ *Ibidem*, Dispaccio n. 47262 del 18 novembre 1867.

⁵ Lettera del Card. Antonelli al Presidente della Confederazione Svizzera: N. 32283 del 23 VII 1864; Nota del 1° giugno 1864 al Card. Segret. Di Stato; Disp. N. 32531 del 22.VII.1864, both in Silloge di documenti che riguardano i rapporti tra Santa Sede e Croce Rossa; sia con il comitato internazionale e sia con le società nazionali della Croce Rossa Asrs, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Fondo organizzazioni internazionali, Croce Rossa Internazionale, 3192, pos. 29, ff. 394-834.

largely aloof from each other, as the Red Cross had to slowly and painfully develop a character and international clout of its own, while the Catholic Church had to find a new role in a rapidly changing world in which the Papal States had ceased to exist. One lingering reason for the Vatican diffidence was the Calvinist cultural milieu from which the ICRC had sprung, always acutely perceived by the Vatican, and the fear that the final goal of the Geneva organisation was to replace Catholic charity all over the world⁶. While the ICRC was, and would remain for decades, entirely selected from Geneva's Calvinist elite, recent literature has shown how the cultural framework behind the Red Cross owed much to Catholicism. The idea of what would become the Red Cross was, after all, born first in deeply Catholic Lombardy, where a tradition of "social priesthood" had emerged from the combination of the Enlightenment and of the new ideas and administrative practices of the French Revolution with the ancient local tradition of religious charity⁷. The perceived anti-Catholic bias of the ICRC's leadership was also somewhat nuanced. While one of its founders, Louis Appia, met with Garibaldi himself in 1866, and spoke disparagingly of Catholicism, Henry Dunant, a harsh critic of the Catholic Church in his youth, attempted in his later years, to obtain an official recognition from the Pope for his organisation⁸. The fear of secular charity replacing the Catholic one, while present from the very beginning, would not seriously alarm Vatican diplomacy until the World Wars forced both humanitarian actors to compete for the right to provide aid for combatants and civilians. In the decades before 1914, the Red Cross developed a capillary presence in many countries, as well as experience in dealing with various kinds of military conflicts. Most importantly, its national societies became organic to their governments while at the same time sharing with each other and with the ICRC a shared identity and heritage⁹. During these years, the Secretariat of State collected information on the national societies, gathering the impression that they were quite diverse in their attitude towards Catholicism, with those from Catholic countries were indeed likely to be perceived as trustworthy¹⁰.

⁶ For the cultural and religious homogeneity of the ICRC in its first decades, see: BOISSIER, Pierre, *From Solferino to Tsushima: History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*, Geneva, Henry Dunant Institute, 1985, pp. 235-236.

⁷ CIPOLLA, Costantino, CORSINI, Paolo, FABBRI, Alessandro, *Dal modello locale bresciano al modello internazionale della Croce Rossa*, in CIPOLLA, Costantino, CORSINI, Paolo (a cura di), *La nascita della Croce Rossa sul modello del cattolicesimo sociale bresciano*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2017, pp. 548-560.

⁸ On Dunant and Catholicism, see: VANNI, Duccio, NANNI, Paolo, *Henry Dunant e la Chiesa cattolica: epilogo ragionato*, in CIPOLLA, Costantino, CORSINI, Paolo (a cura di), *op. cit.*, pp. 561-581.

⁹ See DROMI, Shai M., *Above the Fray: The Red Cross and the Making of the Humanitarian NGO Sector*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020, pp. 65-67.

¹⁰ OSSANDON, Maria Eugenia, «I rapporti della Santa Sede con il comitato internazionale della Croce Rossa (1863-1930)», in *Annales Theologici*, 29, 2015, pp. 275-306, pp. 280-281.

2. 1914-1918

The Great War saw an unprecedented expansion of Red Cross activities, with the ICRC coordinating a massive humanitarian effort aimed to help PoWs throughout the European continent and developing a broader sense of its own mission¹¹. The conflict being the first great test of humanitarian action, the Red Cross was not alone in its efforts: many private and state organisations carried out their own relief activities since the very beginning of the war¹². The Vatican, in an attempt to reassert itself on the international stage after decades of relative isolation, established its own humanitarian network which, while less impressive in its dimensions, proved effective in the same relief fields in which the Red Cross agencies were operating: collecting and dispatching information on missing, captive or dead soldiers, facilitating communication for those who were in captivity, and negotiating with local authorities to improve the conditions of the PoW camps. During the war, direct contact between the two humanitarian networks was sparse, but they managed to cooperate with some success, especially through the auspices of the Swiss Catholic Mission, on sharing information inaccessible to one or the other¹³. The Vatican itself and the ICRC had some interaction as well. To begin with, mainly through its publications, the ICRC informed,

¹¹ GLASSFORD, Sarah, *Coming of Age in the Crucible of War: The First World War and the Expansion of the Canadian Red Cross Society's Humanitarian Vision*, in WYLIE, Neville, OPPENHEIMER, Melanie, CROSSLAND, James (eds.), *The Red Cross Movement, Myths, Practices, Turning Points*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, pp. 199-212.

¹² See COTTER, Cédric, *The Neutrals at War: Humanitarian competition in the Great War*, in PILLER, Elisabeth, WYLIE, Neville (ed. by), *Humanitarianism and the Greater War, 1914-24*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2023. The European War Office founded by King Alfonso of Spain is the object of a recent study: PEREZ, Marina de Arcos, «Finding Out Whereabouts of Missing Persons: The European War Office, Transnational Humanitarianism and Spanish Royal Diplomacy in the First World War», in *The International History Review*, 44, 3/2022, pp. 497-523. The interconnection of Swiss neutrality and humanitarian action was addressed by Cédric Cotter: see COTTER, Cédric, *S'aider pour survivre. Action humanitaire et neutralité suisse pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale*, Geneva, Editions Georg, 2018. See also: BECKER, Annette, *Oublies de la Grande Guerre: humanitaire et culture de guerre, 1914-1948 populations occupées, déportées civiles, prisonniers de guerre*, Paris, Editions Noesis, 1998. On the YMCA, see for example: REZNICK, Jeffrey S., *Healing the Nation. Soldiers and the Culture of Caregiving in Britain During the Great War*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004; STEUER, Kenneth A., *Pursuit of an "Unparalleled Opportunity": The American YMCA and Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy Among the Central Power Nations During World War I, 1914-1923*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009. On the complex ecosystem of aid during the war, see: JONES, Heather, «International or transnational? Humanitarian action during the First World War», in: *European Review of History*, 16, 5/2009, pp. 697-713. See also: CIPOLLA, Costantino, FABBRI, Alessandro, VANNI, Paolo (a cura di), *Le relazioni internazionali della Croce Rossa italiana durante la Grande Guerra*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2021; MONTICONE, Alberto, *La croce e il filo spinato: tra prigionieri e internati civili nella grande guerra 1914-1918: la missione umanitaria dei delegati religiosi*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2013; MONTICONE, Alberto (a cura di), *La prigionia nella Grande Guerra: dai documenti della Santa Sede, della Croce Rossa e delle organizzazioni umanitarie*, Udine, Gaspari, 2018.

¹³ DISSEGNA, Mara, *The International Committee of the Red Cross, the Vatican and Prisoners of War*, in MELLONI, Alberto, CAVAGNINI, Giovanni, GROSSI, Giulia (ed. by), *Benedict XV: A Pope in the World of the 'Useless Slaughter' (1914-1918)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2020, pp. 459-477, p. 474. On the Vatican humanitarian action during the Great War, see also: LATOUR, Francis, «L'action du Saint-Siège en faveur des prisonniers de guerre pendant la Première Guerre mondiale», in *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 253, 2014, pp. 43-56, p. 44; YERLY, Frédéric, «Grande guerre et diplomatie humanitaire. La mission catholique Suisse en faveur des prisonniers de guerre (1914-1918)», in *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 58, 1998, pp. 13-28.

without distinction, the national governments and the Holy See on its humanitarian activities and made general appeals for diplomatic support¹⁴. On the other hand, on 31 January 1914, the Pope had a successful appeal to the belligerent countries for an exchange of disabled prisoners, which the ICRC had previously failed to obtain. Under the suggestion of a Swiss priest, the Pope sent a letter to Gustave Ador, whose tenure as President of the ICRC had begun in 1910, to congratulate him for his humanitarian efforts. With this letter, the Holy See thought it could improve its image in Protestant Geneva. This exchange was followed by other, friendly, communications on the subject of humanitarian action in the war. The main topic was the attempts by both actors to obtain a general truce to identify the dead and help the wounded, to facilitate prisoner exchanges, to protect PoWs from reprisals¹⁵. Despite this polite, if sporadic, communication, crowned by Ador's audience with the Pope in January 1916, none of these efforts was carried out jointly: the ICRC and the Holy See only ever made diplomatic overtures to the belligerent powers individually, although they did praise the other institution's efforts. Partially, the lack of cooperation surely originated with some degree of reciprocal lack of trust, but it also reflected a difference of both philosophical and practical differences: the ICRC's action was thoroughly imbued with secular legalism, and so was its practical approach¹⁶. At the same time, as Cédric Cotter recently demonstrated, both were secretly concerned that their prestige and standing as humanitarian actors were jeopardised by the activity of the other¹⁷.

3. 1918-1939

The end of the conflict saw a great strengthening and expansion of the prerogatives and scope of action of the Red Cross movement. The post-war order, based on international law and a network of international organisations connected to various degrees with the League of Nations enshrined the role of the Red Cross and of the ICRC as a de-facto monopolist of wartime aid for PoWs. For the moment, however, this was not evident to Vatican diplomacy, which would not realise its

¹⁴ See, for example, the «Bulletin International des Sociétés de la Croix-Rouge» and the «Nouvelles de l'Agence internationale des prisonniers de guerre».

¹⁵ OSSANDON, María Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p.288.

¹⁶ This does not mean that the ICRC was incapable of pragmatism. Indeed, as underlined by Forsythe, a mixture of legalism and creative pragmatism is one of the trademarks of the Red Cross. See FORSYTHE, David P., *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 24.

¹⁷ In Cotter's words: «as these examples show, the Vatican and the Swiss occupied the same humanitarian ground and found themselves promoting complementary humanitarian activities. They shared similar objectives and were prepared to collaborate to achieve them. The Swiss Federal Council discussed the Pope's proposals and was ready to implement them. But at the same time, they also competed for the prestige, visibility, and political benefits that were believed to flow from these initiatives». See COTTER, Cédric, *op. cit.*, p. 480.

disadvantage until the Second World War¹⁸. The interwar years therefore saw a decisive shift in the relative “humanitarian reach” of the two actors, also because of the Holy See’s decision, after some wavering, to reject the new international order inaugurated at Versailles, which it perceived as liberal, masonic and Protestant. For a while, it had seemed possible that the Church could build on the experience of wartime charity to strengthen the Church’s standing on the world stage, regaining credibility in the eyes of the distrustful, victorious Allied Powers¹⁹. As recent research demonstrated, the financial networks established by the Holy See proved of key importance for the successful transformation of *Save the Children*, the organisation established in London by Eglantyne Jebb in 1919 into a global organisation²⁰. That trend continued, a more productive relationship with the Red Cross could have developed, and the growing “humanitarian isolation” of the Holy See, which culminated in the 1930s, might have been mitigated. This kind of Catholic religion-based humanitarianism, however, did not last long. The reactionary turn of the Interwar Years, mainly directed against communism but also deeply suspicious of any form of secularism, put an end to that²¹. Therefore, as humanitarianism got increasingly institutionalised and connected to international law, the ICRC became in the eyes of the national governments the only legitimate provider of humanitarian aid, especially on the subject of prisoners of war²².

Because of its belligerent international stance during this phase, the Holy See became more hostile towards the Red Cross as a whole, preventing any development of the relationship between the two actors²³. The internal crisis of the Red Cross Movement, which emphasised the contrast between the ICRC and the new League of the Red Cross National Societies in the 1920s, reinforced the Vatican’s prejudices, as both sides levelled accusations of secularism and freemasonry at each other, attempting to obtain the Vatican’s support against its competitor²⁴. In the background,

¹⁸ See, for example, Nota di Mons. Bertoli, luglio 1947, L’attività della Santa Sede in favore dei prigionieri di guerra nel diritto internazionale, AAV, Archivio Nunziatura Apostolica Svizzera, b.149, fasc.383.

¹⁹ While the Holy See had proclaimed its impartiality during the conflict, it was generally perceived, with some good reason, as closer to the Central Powers and, in particular, to Catholic Austria-Hungary. See: MOROZZO DELLA ROCCA, Roberto, «Benedetto XV e Costantinopoli: fu vera neutralità?», in *Cristianesimo e storia*, 14, 99, 2/1993, pp. 375-384.

²⁰ Benedict’s interest in the welfare of children led to two consecutive encyclicals for the children of Central Europe: *Paternum Iam Dui*, and *Annus Iam Plenum*. See: HOULIHAN, Patrick J., «Renovating Christian Charity: Global Catholicism, the Save the Children Fund, and Humanitarianism During The First World War», in *Past & Present*, 250, 1/2021, pp. 203-241; CABANES, Bruno, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918-1924*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 283.

²¹ HOULIHAN, Patrick J., *op. cit.*

²² On the institutionalisation of humanitarianism, see MENEGUZZI ROSTAGNI, Carla, *L’organizzazione internazionale tra politica di potenza e cooperazione*, Padova, Cedam, 2000; FREEMAN, Dena, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-37.

²³ The early 1920s saw, however, a degree of cooperation regarding the return of prisoners of war and in the context of the Russian Civil War. See PETTINAROLI, Laura, *La diplomazia umanitaria della Santa Sede nei confronti del mondo russo (1914-1922)*, in MELLONI, Alberto, CAVAGNINI, Giovanni, GROSSI, Giulia (ed. by), *op. cit.*, pp. 739-751.

²⁴ The League was a project spearheaded by the American Red Cross which, greatly strengthened by the war, felt ready to challenge the ICRC’s leadership of the Movement. See STEINACHER, Gerald, *Humanitarians at War: The Red Cross in the Shadow of the Holocaust*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. On the innovative character

however, was the Holy See's unease at witnessing the transformation of the Red Cross – and especially the League – into a movement whose field of action moved beyond the battlefield to promoting its values and began encompassing the aid of the sick and, more dangerously, the formation of the youth²⁵. While the nationalisation of the Red Cross was a welcome development for the Vatican, as it diminished the organisation's original Calvinist character, it was also true that the League was intensely active in fields which went beyond battlefield aid.²⁶ One controversy due to the rising fears of Red Cross' usurpations of the Church's prerogatives happened in the Netherlands, when the Bishop of the diocese of Roermond, Mgr. Laurentius Schrijnen, when he forbade Catholics to join or cooperate with the Dutch Red Cross as he believed they were attempting to replace Catholic aid in the field of healthcare²⁷.

If the progressive process of institutionalisation of humanitarianism led to the isolation of the Catholic Church as a provider of aid, Vatican diplomacy was at the same time reluctant to engage in negotiations which defined the architecture of this new global arrangement²⁸. The Holy See was consistently invited to the international conferences that systematically sanctioned the evolution of the Red Cross and of international law, the Holy See, when it saw fit to participate, never did so with more than a detached attitude and limited interest. For example, when the Fifteenth, held in Tokyo in 1934, the Apostolic Delegate, Mgr. Paolo Marella, was unpersuaded by the Secretary of State's position that participation to the conference was unnecessary given the merely technical subjects which would be discussed. Marella repeatedly underlined the importance in terms of visibility of the participation of the Holy See in a country where Catholicism was barely present at all. An observer was then allowed to attend, the Catholic physician Vincenzo de Paoli Bunkei Totsuka, but when Marella encouraged the dispatch of a delegation, he was refused²⁹.

Another important factor in the Holy See's perception of a Red Cross attempting to usurp its role of moral guidance is that the Interwar Years, after 1930 in particular, saw a remarkable increase of anti-Protestant sentiments within the Church. As underlined by Paolo Zanini, by the end of the Great War many Catholic observers felt besieged by a global Protestant proselytism

of the League, see also: OPPENHEIMER, Melanie, SCECH, Susanne, FATHI, Romain, WYLIE, Neville, CRESSWELL, Rosemary, «Resilient Humanitarianism? Using Assemblage to re-evaluate the history of the League of Red Cross Societies», in *The International History Review*, 43, 3/2020, pp. 579-597.

²⁵ In 1923, after the ICRC had attempted to rally his support against the League, the then Nuncio in Berna, Luigi Maglione, wrote to Giuseppe Pizzardo, substitute Secretary of State, that the wisest course for the Holy See was to maintain a strict neutrality. See Aav, Archivio Nunziatura Apostolica Svizzera, b.43, f.160, N. 7398, *Croce Rossa*, Maglione to Pizzardo, 19 August 1923.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ *Santa Sede e Croce Rossa: 1863-1953*, Città del Vaticano, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, 1954, p. 48.

²⁸ The institutionalisation did not mean that the Catholic Church or other non-Red Cross or League of Nations sponsored actors could or would not carry out charitable action. Indeed, as Davide Rodogno underlined, a monolithic "humanitarian regime" did not materialise in the Interwar Years. See RODOGNO, Davide, *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918-1930*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, p. 15.

²⁹ *Santa Sede e Croce Rossa*, cit., pp. 53-54.

campaign. At the beginning of the 1930s, a violent campaign was launched by Catholic intellectuals which denounced an alleged Protestant attempt to increase their influence in the country by weaponising anticlericalism. While the main target of these polemics were the YMCA and the small Italian Protestant communities, the idea of a global alliance of enemies of Catholicism with its capitals in London and Geneva was widespread, and could not but contribute to the image of the Red Cross as part of this sinister plot³⁰.

The growing Vatican attitude of distrust for the Red Cross is confirmed by the correspondence of Filippo Bernardini, who replaced Maglione as Nuncio in Bern in 1935, and would be one of the key individuals in the Vatican-ICRC relations in the following years. He proposed, to the Secretary of State Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, in May 1937, a subsidy from the Holy See to the ICRC's effort for the victims of the Spanish Civil War. The response was negative. The Holy Father, Pacelli wrote, «did not believe he could accept to the request; and this for various reasons, the first of which [was] that the International Red Cross, according to information he had received, is a notoriously masonic institution, and in this respect it would be conform to the mind of the Holy Father rather to take steps, with all caution, to ensure that the initiatives in word are not favoured». Moreover, Pacelli concluded, the Holy See was not a signatory to the Geneva Convention, moreover, it did not fail to already bring Spain the relief that was in its power. Months later, Bernardini received a memorandum (this time by Giuseppe Motta rather than by the ICRC), with the request that it be transmitted directly to the Holy Father. Bernardini once again wrote the Secretariat of State, stating that he had done so even knowing that the answer would be negative because the Nunciature had every reason to be grateful to Motta. He had however outlined to Motta the difficulty of finding Catholic institutions willing to help nationalist prisoners through contributions to the ICRC. Most importantly, Bernardini had asked Motta that he put in writing what he had repeatedly told him in private conversations, that is that the ICRC was free from masonic influence³¹. Pacelli once again replied that the Red Cross' demands could not be accepted, and not because of a lack of understanding of the noble humanitarian aims that it proposes to pursue in Spain afflicted by civil war, «but rather by facts that I hardly need to remind you of». Besides, the Holy See was not, Pacelli reminded Bernardini, a signatory to the Geneva Convention, and this alone would be sufficient to determine its attitude on the matter, if the case in question was not so complex³².

The challenges caused by the gradual crumbling of the Versailles order in the 1930s, meanwhile, forced both the Holy See and the ICRC to position themselves in the face of totalitarianism. Both

³⁰ ZANINI, Paolo, *Il 'pericolo protestante'. Chiesa e cattolici italiani di fronte alla questione della libertà religiosa (1922-1955)*, Milano-Firenze, Le Monnier, 2019, pp. 9, 52-55.

³¹ N.3450, Oggetto: Croce Rossa internazionale, Berna, 25 gennaio 1938, Bernardini a Pacelli, ff.245-265, pos. 1, Pio XII, Fondo org. Int., Asrs, AA.EE.

³² N.n162185, Pacelli a Bernardini, 19 maggio 1937, ff.245-265, pos. 1, Pio XII, Fondo org. Int., Asrs, AA.EE.

staunchly anti-communist, the two organisations appeased the new authoritarian regimes of the Right, in order to earn protection and freedom of action. The rise of Nazi Germany alienated the Church more than it did the ICRC, but neither organisation took a firm stance against the wave of aggressions unleashed by the fascist powers which culminated in the Second World War. 1939 found the two “centrals” of humanitarianism unprepared, but the ICRC enjoyed the structural advantages granted to it by international law.

4. 1939-1945

In 1939, therefore, the Holy See was quick to realise that cooperation with the ICRC was key for the work of its newly re-established Vatican Information Bureau, as the belligerent governments made it clear that Geneva, alongside the protecting powers, was the only channel they would cooperate through when it came to aid for PoWs. The Vatican was then faced with two options: to try and obtain the help of the Red Cross (in terms of logistical help in dispatching aid to Poland, but mostly in obtaining the PoW lists necessary for the work of the Information bureau), or to continue in attempts to enlist the support of the national governments. These efforts to establish cooperation between Rome and Geneva, carried out by Mgr. Besson and Mgr. Bernardini, were frustrated, from the beginning, by both diffidence and incompatible goals. While the Secretariat of State had come to the conclusion that its previous policy of ignoring (or even hindering) the Red Cross was not feasible, it opposed any formal or open association of the two institutions. The Church would not accept any equal partnership with other organisations, and Pius XII himself reiterated that no such agreements could be made³³.

The ICRC, on the other hand, perceived the Holy See's attempts to re-enter the field of information activity as a threat to its prestige and usefulness (and perhaps those of Switzerland itself) vis a vis the great powers³⁴. In a meeting with Bernardini in Autumn 1939, the ICRC's President Max Huber and Jacques Chenevière, director of the International Committee's Prisoners of War Agency, politely stated that they were eager to collaborate with the Holy See, and yet

³³ On the wartime relations between the ICRC and the Holy See, see: DEBONS, Delphine, «Le Cidr, le Vatican et l'oeuvre de renseignements sur les prisonniers de guerre», in *Relations internationales*, 138, 2/2009, pp. 39-57, pp. 53-57, PAPELEUX, Leon, *L'action caritative du Saint-Siège en faveur des prisonniers de guerre (1939-1945)*, Bruxelles, Institut Historique Belge de Rome, 1991; PICCIAREDDA, Stefano, *Diplomazia umanitaria. La Croce Rossa nella Seconda guerra mondiale* Bologna, Il Mulino, 2003; PILI, Jacopo, «Il dialogo tra Vaticano e Comitato Internazionale della Croce Rossa sulla questione dei prigionieri di guerra (1939-1944)», in *Italia Contemporanea*, 304, 2024, pp. 1-27.

³⁴ One of the reasons of the ICRC's worries regarding Vatican competition was that the ICRC's information work was (quite unfairly) routinely criticised by external observers, and in particular by the British public opinion. See WYLIE, The British Red Cross Society and the 'parcels crisis' of 1940-1, in WYLIE, Neville, OPPENHEIMER, Melanie, CROSSLAND, James (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 245-263.

reiterated that it had to focus on spiritual relief, leaving the material one to the ICRC³⁵. The contacts established by the Vatican in 1939 proved of limited value and ceased in 1941 as the scale of the conflict expanded, they were nevertheless received by the ICRC as robbing it of due credit for its work³⁶. The only viable diplomatic channel, negotiation with the belligerent countries, became more feasible with the extension of the war to the Mediterranean. After enlisting the support of the Italian Government, the Secretariat of State attempted in vain to secure that of London, but the Vatican representatives on the ground in the Middle East and Australia established cordial if informal agreements with the local British authorities there which ensured the Information Bureau could work effectively. Reports of several different incidents within areas under British control and elsewhere convinced the Secretariat of State that certain national Red Cross societies, as well as some representatives of the ICRC abroad, were doing their best to hinder the work of the Vatican information bureau and its overseas branches³⁷. A planned challenge to the ICRC on this subject never materialised, but in the end the work of the Vatican information bureaus continued all through the conflict. Effective methods of cooperation materialised nevertheless with both the ICRC and a number of national societies on a range of fields, such as the dispatch of financial and material aid in various war theatres, and even information work³⁸.

The necessity of an understanding between the two actors became clearer in 1943 with the invasion of Italy, when the ICRC found that its resources, already stretched thin, were insufficient to deal with the large number of Italian soldiers detained in Germany³⁹. At the same time, the Holy See saw its own communications disrupted by the war on Italian soil. Despite several meetings and an official visit of ICRC representatives to the Vatican, the enduring legacy of mutual distrust, and in particular the Vatican's reluctance to accept cooperation as equals, meant that no new agreement was reached. In the end, while the Vatican Secretariat of State believed that «it would be desirable that the activity of the Holy See not be hindered, but rather assisted and coordinated with that of the [ICRC]», it was also unwilling to⁴⁰.

Apart from some minor exceptions, there was also no coordinated action on the attempted extermination of the Jews. Both organisations concluded that openly denouncing the Nazi regime's actions would do little to help its victims while endangering many others.⁴¹ While they reached

³⁵ DEBONS, Delphine, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

³⁶ Montini stated that the cooperation with the ICRC had not had "meaningful practical results". Aav, Archivio Nunziatura Apostolica Svizzera, b. 152 390, fasc. 5b, Archivio Bernardini, 11343, 31 marzo 194, Bernardini a Montini, oggetto: ricerche di prigionieri e internati di guerra.

³⁷ Maglione to Bernardini, 10 February 1943, n. 61112, in Aav, Archivio Nunziatura Apostolica Svizzera, b. 147, f. 376. According to Maglione, the Vatican charitable action towards PoWs had been especially impeded by Red Cross representatives (both from the ICRC and the national societies) in Africa, India and Australia.

³⁸ See ADSS, t. 6, doc. 344, p.329; PILI, Jacopo, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁹ PICCIAREDDA, Stefano, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁴⁰ See ADSS, t. 6, doc. 267, p. 10.

⁴¹ VARNIER, Giovanni B., «Il prezzo del silenzio per realizzare un servizio umanitario a favore dei perseguitati

these conclusions autonomously, there were a few exchanges on the subject, which stressed the partial similarities in their perspectives. Interestingly, the Vatican's advice to the Geneva organisation was avoid any confrontation with the Nazi regime on ideological grounds: Bernardini reported to the Secretariat of State that

[the International Committee's President] Mr. Huber and other members repeatedly sought my advice about the response to be given to the repeated pressure exerted by some nation -they did not specify which one- over the Committee to condemn what happens that is reprehensible in some countries. Thinking that the Holy See was in a similar situation, they wished to know how ecclesiastical authority regulates itself in such circumstances. I replied that the Holy See has a spiritual heritage to guard and to defend, and if this is attacked, it will be a matter of choosing the how and when, but [it is imperative that something is done]. The ICRC, on the other hand, has a purely charitable task to fulfill, which would be seriously compromised if, stepping out of the practical field, it pronounced condemnations of men and principles, which are beyond its competence⁴².

5. 1945-1964

The end of the Second World War saw a weakened ICRC, whose activity during the conflict had been perceived by some powers as ineffective or ethically dubious⁴³. Attempting to preserve its key role in the Red Cross movement against growing international criticism, the Geneva Committee began to see the Vatican as a useful ally, and to involve it in the series of meetings and conferences which, in the second half of the 1940s, led to a revision of the Geneva statutes. The Vatican, on its part, had learned the lessons taught by the war, and had realised that if it wanted to be able to carry out its humanitarian action in future conflicts, then it could not refuse to participate in the ongoing process of reshaping international law⁴⁴. Already in 1944, a note from the Secretariat of State recognised that it was «desirable that in future international conventions on the subject the Holy See's activity be given appropriate legal recognition»⁴⁵. A committee was established within the Vatican Information Bureau in order to «appraising the Holy See's efforts over the centuries "to discipline the rude customs of war" and to assess the best path forward for the Vatican's humanitarian activity». While not all of the committee's proposals were accepted, when the time

razziali: Croce Rossa e Vaticano nella Seconda guerra mondiale», in *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 71, 283, 3/2004, pp. 525-530.

⁴² ADSS, V.8, p. 597.

⁴³ The Soviets were the main critics of the ICRC's action on an international scale, but its main competitors were the American and Swedish Red Cross societies. See STEINACHER, Gerald, *op. cit.*

⁴⁴ 10 May 1944, Comitato giuridico sociale, studi per il funzionamento di un ufficio informazioni a Ginevra. ff. 8-14, Pos. 2, Pio XII,

⁴⁵ ADSS, t. 6, doc. 267, p.10.

came for a more vigorous presence of the Church in the field of humanitarian law, Vatican diplomacy proved ready to seize it. The catastrophe of the Second World War had made it necessary, in the eyes of the victorious Allied Powers, to deeply revise the architecture of humanitarian international law. In the decade after the end of the war, a series of conferences organised by either the newborn United Nations and the Red Cross worked on the herculean task of updating humanitarianism to the era of total and nuclear war⁴⁶. The Secretariat of State saw that an active participation in the conferences was the only path forward if the Holy See wanted to have a say in the new picture. Isolation was not a feasible option anymore, especially if Pius XII's ambition of reshaping the world order according to Christian and Catholic principles was to become reality⁴⁷. Yet, the old problem remained. How could the Holy See accept to cooperate on an equal footing with other humanitarian organisations? In the end, a solution was found:

The presence of Catholic observers [at the conference] may negate the necessity for a direct intervention by the Holy See, which [has already] sent two observers to the preliminary conference. In this way, while our [points of view] can be adequately outlined by the representatives of the Catholic institutions, [it does not compromise] the matter of principle concerning the presentation of the Holy See as equivalent to other [religious] organisations. The work of the Holy See should be recognised by the Convention with a legal standing as a matter of fact above other professional organisations. At the same time, the representatives of the Holy See can continue to take their place as 'observers' at further meetings of the national delegates of the Red Cross. In this way, the Holy See intervenes both directly, albeit with observers, at the meetings of the [Red Cross] national delegates, and indirectly [in meetings such as this] of confessional organisations, which are not subjects of international law⁴⁸.

Aware of the International Committee's difficulties, the Holy See dispatched its own representatives to the conferences that took place in Geneva and Stockholm, and achieved a number of its goals. These were summed up in a meeting held on 2 August 1947 attended, among others, by Giovanni Battista Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, and Bernardini. The first was to carefully monitor the work underway on revising conventions concerning wounded soldiers, maritime warfare, aid to civilians and PoWs, devoting particular attention to those articles that might affect the Church's charitable action, and at the same time highlighting the great work

⁴⁶ See VAN DIJK, Boyd, «The Great Humanitarian: The Soviet Union, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the Geneva Conventions of 1949», in *Law and History Review*, 37, 1/2019, pp. 209-235.

⁴⁷ While charity was predominantly carried out by state-actors in the Post-war era, as noted by Silvia Salvatici, religion informed the post-1945 international organisations because it was perceived as key to a recovery of «healthy» and «moral» mindset necessary for post-war reconstruction. See SALVATICI, Silvia, *A History of Humanitarianism, 1789-Present: In the Name of Others*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015.

⁴⁸ Note by Mgr. Emilio Rossi, 12 January 1947, Asrs, AA.EE. SS., Pio XII, Fondo organizzazioni internazionali, Croce Rossa Internazionale, Pos. 2, ff.1-267.

carried out by the clergy and representatives of the Holy See. The second task was to highlight as much as possible the work of the Vatican Information Office. The third was to lay the groundwork for the Holy See's charitable activities in any future conflict, whilst the last was to remove the obstacles that had hindered the Church's relief efforts during the Second World War and to «break the monopoly» enjoyed by «a few organisations» over humanitarian matters. Finally, it would be important for the pontifical commission to bear in mind that, while coordination and cooperation with other organisations and countries was acceptable, the Holy See must retain its autonomy and freedom of action⁴⁹. Crucially, an amendment of the conventions enshrining a recognition of the right of all humanitarian actors to carry out their action on an equal footing with the ICRC was achieved quite soon and in a relatively effortless fashion⁵⁰. With the main object of contention resolved, and with a Catholic Church which had accepted collaboration with the American-led liberal international order against Communism, the two organisations presented a relatively united front during the amendment process⁵¹. In the following years, the Vatican saw the International Committee as an ally against Soviet attempts to influence international conferences, and did what it could to defend it from criticism⁵². At the same time, Vatican diplomats had not forgotten the previous conflicts and saw the weakened ICRC as essentially disposable: its defence was not a battle that it was deemed worth fighting at the expense of the Holy See's own interests⁵³.

No comprehensive study exists concerning relations between the Catholic Church and the ICRC during the second half of the twentieth century. In 1948, Paul Ruegger was elected President of the ICRC. The fact that Ruegger was a Catholic would have been unthinkable until a few years before, showing how deep the changes in the International Committee had been since the war, and was of great importance for the Holy See⁵⁴. The new president visited Rome in 1949, and was granted an

⁴⁹ *Santa Sede e Croce Rossa: 1863-1953*, cit., p. 73.

⁵⁰ The main difficulty was the opposition of the British delegation, still aiming at upholding the ICRC's monopoly. *Ibidem*, pp. 71-77.

⁵¹ Contacts between the Vatican and the United States had been developing since the 1930s, and culminated in a solid alliance after the war. See CECI, Lucia, *L'interesse superiore, il Vaticano e l'Italia di Mussolini*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2013, pp. 193-194, 264-275; CASTAGNA, Luca, *Un ponte oltre l'oceano: assetti politici e strategie diplomatiche tra Stati Uniti e Santa Sede nella prima metà del Novecento (1914-1940)*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011; REGOLI, Roberto (a cura di), *La Santa Sede, gli Stati Uniti e le relazioni internazionali durante il pontificato di Pio XII*, Roma, Studium, 2022.

⁵² One important example was Nuncio Ildebrando Antoniutti's defense of the ICRC's action during the 1952 Red Cross International Conference in Toronto. The ICRC deeply appreciated Antoniutti's support, feelings that were personally confirmed by Ruegger to Bernardini in Berne. On their side, the ICRC supported Antoniutti's plea to the Red Cross National Societies to defend the persons and work of the Catholic missionaries who, in many countries and especially in East Asia, were routinely threatened. See N.1612/52 Antoniutti a Montini, 12 agosto 1952, Oggetto: XVIII Conferenza Internazionale della Croce Rossa, Asrs, AA.EE.SS., Pio XII, Fondo organizzazioni internazionali, Croce Rossa Internazionale, 3192, pos. 28, ff.1-442.

⁵³ The minutes of the 2 August 1947 meeting underlined that «[...] In the event that the International Committee [itself] comes under discussion, the Vatican delegation must uphold [the aforementioned points] without, however, linking its fate to that of the International Committee». See Riunione del 2 Agosto 1948, Asrs, AA.EE. SS., Pio XII, Fondo organizzazioni internazionali, Croce Rossa Internazionale, pos.11, ff.1-254.

⁵⁴ STEINACHER, Gerald, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

audience by Pius XII⁵⁵. Three Presidents of the ICRC visited the Vatican and met the Pope after Ruegger⁵⁶. Starting with 1950, the Vatican he Vatican could not afford to make one, and in 1952 and 1953 it received, in different forms, more requests on the same lines, which were finally answered by a donation of 10.000 US dollars, an extraordinary contribution which was a «sign of the good will of the Pope towards the ICRC»⁵⁷. Another donation of the same amount was paid in 1961, and several examples of financial collaboration with the ICRC can be seen over the following decades⁵⁸. Across the years, the Holy See and the ICRC exchanged information on humanitarian crises in Palestine, Indochina, Cuba, Egypt, Congo, Yemen and Nigeria, and the Vatican made more than one donation to the Committee⁵⁹. The jealousy and reserve which featured so strongly in the past seemed to have faded from each organisation's perception of the other – even if in 1972, during a meeting in Rome with the ICRC President Marcel Naville, Paul VI felt the need to specify that it was the duty of the Church «to help the Red Cross» and «never be a competitor to its humanitarian work, and rather help it with all its means»⁶⁰. The potential for competition lingers, however. During the Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), the ICRC was the target of criticism by certain sectors of public opinion, including members of several National Societies, which judged its activity to be hindered by political obstacles and consequently too slow. On that occasion, the National Societies underlined how many members of the public would rather donate to the Churches (Catholic or not), as they were ready to criticise policymakers when need be. Indeed, in its efforts to alleviate the famine in Biafra, the ICRC faced competition from Joint Church Aid, a coalition of relief agencies in which the Catholic Church played a prominent role, to the point that the ICRC was led to ask it to act on its behalf with the Biafran authorities⁶¹. This underlines how the possibility of competition among different actors is always present in the field of humanitarian diplomacy, even within a context where original ideological differences have lost their importance. Conversely, the fact that the Holy See could join in such an initiative as Joint Church Aid demonstrated how the Catholic Church had shifted away from its contemptuous reluctance of decades past when it came to collaborating with other religious and humanitarian actors.

⁵⁵ *International Review of the Red Cross*, 31, 366, 1949, pp. 403-405.

⁵⁶ TRAUFFER, Roland Bernhard, *Les relations entre le Saint-Siège et le Comité International de la Croix-Rouge. Les relations postérieures à 1947 avec une présentation complémentaire du rôle du Saint-Siège dans les Conférences internationales de la Croix-Rouge et une note sur le développement du Droit international humanitaire*, Doctoral thesis, Rome: Pontificiam Universitatem S. Thomae, 1980, pp. 105-107.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 121. On the Red Cross humanitarian action during the conflicts in Palestine and Algeria, see REY-SCHYRR, Catherine, «Le CICR et l'assistance aux réfugiés arabes palestiniens (1948-1950)», *International Review of the Red Cross*, 83, 843, 2001, pp. 739-761; FAIVRE, Maurice, *La Croix-rouge pendant la guerre d'Algérie: un éclairage nouveau sur les victimes et les internes*, Panazol, Lavauzelle, 2007.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

⁶¹ FORSYTHE, David P. «The International Committee of the Red Cross and Humanitarian Assistance: A policy analysis», in *International Review of the Red Cross*, 314, 1996, pp. 512-531.

6. Conclusions

The story of the relations between the two ‘centrals of humanitarianism’ is to some extent a history of the shifting power balance within the field of humanitarian action. What conclusions can be drawn from these interactions? The first concerns the importance of participating in the process of codification of humanitarianism in order to retain freedom of action in an increasingly institutionalised world. The ICRC, as a private organisation, belonged to an older era of humanitarianism, but its exceptional clout and the far reach of the Red Cross movement allowed it to benefit from the first attempts to build a legal architecture of international law before, and most of all after the Great War. While both the Geneva Committee and the Holy See participated in the humanitarian effort during that conflict, the ICRC was at the forefront of the change, and solidified its position as the new order was defined by the victorious powers. Benedict XV’s apparent openness to an engagement with the international humanitarian system reversed into relative seclusion. Distrusting the Versailles order from the beginning, and increasingly sceptical of the ICRC and of the new League, all Vatican diplomacy did was observe the new arrangements from the outside, probably without fully realising their implications. It took the hard lessons of the Second World War to convince the Secretariat of State of the necessity of not only recognising the evolution of the international system, but of the need to actively participate in it.

A second conclusion pertains to humanitarian actors’ perception of each other. In the case of the Vatican and the ICRC, it is possible to identify a general trend of trying to maintain a privileged position as providers of humanitarian aid, while often also attempting to restrict the field of action of others. An analysis of the two actors’ priorities reveals how, when in a position of weakness, they tended to uphold an almost democratic vision of humanitarianism, where each and every actor is entitled to contribute with equal agency and dignity. When operating from a vantage point of strength, on the other hand, they often made a case for the unicity and superiority of their own efforts, justified according to either pragmatic or ideological grounds. This tendency did not always hold true, and it did not prevent genuine collaboration. Neither side imagined that their humanitarian “rivals” should be completely cut off from charitable activities, a proposition that would not have been feasible in any case. The tendency to limit and contain the field of activity of the other was, however, consistent. In the 1860s the Papal Government chose to adhere to the Geneva Convention, but remained acutely conscious of the secular nature of the Red Cross’ humanitarian action, fearing that it would overshadow the religious one. The nadir of the relations between the two actors coincided with the realisation by the Holy See that, during the Interwar Years, the Red Cross movement was expanding its field of interest beyond wartime aid, threatening the Church’s role in the moral and social formation of society. The ICRC, on the other hand, did what it could to restrict the action of the Holy See to spiritual assistance. Once the principle of the

equal right enjoyed by all humanitarian actors to give their contribution in wartime was affirmed, gatekeeping became difficult in other fields as well. Yet, even decades after the war, on occasion of the late 1960s Nigerian Civil War, the ICRC feared the humanitarian competition of a Catholic-led coalition which seemed likely to overshadow the Red Cross in the eyes of the international community⁶². Humanitarian competition, it would appear, looms perpetually over the diverse network of charitable action.

Finally, when addressing the evolution of Catholic humanitarianism towards the modern contemporary conception of human rights during the first half of the Twentieth Century, it is important to consider the Church's relationship with other actors. If the challenges of the first Postwar era, the intellectual efforts of philosophers such as Maritain, the horrors of totalitarianism, the tactical rapprochement with the United States, the challenges of the Cold War, the social and economic changes of the 1960s all played a role in easing the traditionalist rigidity and exclusivity of Catholic charity, so did the necessity of facing a strong "humanitarianism monopolist" in Geneva⁶³. That long process leading towards the Second Vatican Council and a Catholic version of the liberal and secular "human rights" was also shaped by the polite competition with the Red Cross⁶⁴.

⁶² On humanitarian diplomacy during the Nigerian Civil War, see GUARDIAO, Ana, «Between Idealism and Pragmatism: The Christian Churches' humanitarian aid to Biafra in and from colonial São Tomé (1967-1970)», in *Revista de História da Sociedade e da Cultura*, 24, 2/2024, pp. 109-131.

⁶³ On Maritain's influence, see Maritain's own *Christianisme et démocratie*, Paris, P. Hartmann, 1947; LORENZINI, Daniele, *Diritti della persona o diritti dell'uomo? Jacques Maritain e i diritti umani. Fra totalitarismo, antisemitismo e democrazia (1936-1951)*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2012, pp.15-23.

⁶⁴ On the degree to which the Second Vatican Council opened to other forms of Christianity and of charity, see the decree on ecumenism, issued in 1964 by Paul VI. In particular, see «Unitatis redintegratio» n. 12, AAS, 57 (1965).

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