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The Vietnam War, the Church, the Christian Democratic Party and the Italian Left Catholics

Daniela Saresella

Department of Historical Studies, University of Milan, 20122 Milan, Italy; Daniela.saresella@unimi.it

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Abstract: Over the years of the Cold War, the conflict in Vietnam assumed the significance of a clash between two civilizations, the West and communism. Italian Catholics thus found themselves not only invoking the end of the conflict, but also expressing their evaluations on the choices made in international politics by the two superpowers. The positions assumed by the ecclesiastic Institution, the Christian Democrats and the Catholic world in Italy towards the war in Indochina were not identical: in fact, if—with a few exceptions—the ecclesiastic hierarchy was distinguished by its extreme caution, in the Catholic party different positions became manifest. It was mainly in Catholic associations, and in general amongst believers closer to the experience of the Vatican Council, that a radical sense of aversion to U.S. foreign policy developed.

Keywords: Vietnam War; Italian Catholics; Cold War; Italian Church; Christian Democratic Party

1. The Italian Church

The sixties saw a period of profound change, not only in the West but in other continents, too: the civil rights movement in the United States, the battles against oppressive regimes in Latin America, the cultural revolution in China, the upheavals in Eastern European countries and the leading role played by young people all enlivened the decade. The Catholic Church was also marked by radical innovations with the pontificate of John XXIII and from 1962 with the start of the Second Vatican Council. During the Council's sessions, liturgical reform was discussed, as well as the relationship of the Church to the West, the role of missionaries towards the emancipation of Third World peoples, the poor in contemporary society and ecumenism. What Pope Angelo Roncalli succeeded in establishing was a different concept of the relationship between Catholics and non-Catholics, evident in the encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (1961): the Church thus opened up an exchange of views with other Christian confessions and other religions in general, persuaded that respect for human beings and the need for life experience and faith to come together were of prior importance compared to discriminating elements. The desire for dialogue also extended to the Marxist world, towards which the ecclesiastic Institution had always demonstrated diffidence and aversion: on 1 July 1949, the Holy Office had passed a decree establishing excommunication for those believers "who upheld the doctrine of communism, materialism and anti-Christianity," an excommunication that extended to all those who carried out propaganda, considered "apostates of the Catholic faith." The condemnation was severe, since it not only regarded the doctrine itself but those who professed it (Ruggieri 2011).

Truth to tell, at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the context of modernist thinking, some believers had sought contact with the socialist world but the experience had concluded after the excommunication of modernism in the encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (September 1907), and later in the early post-war period with the advent of authoritarian and conservative regimes (Saresella 2015). The "dialogue" was taken up again in the years of the Vatican Council and post-Council, due also to the fresh attention to social contradictions that was taking root amongst "God's people" (Barrau 1998; Pellettier 2002; McLeod 2007; Corrin 2013; Horn 2015; Saresella 2016; Cellini 2017). Thus, the Catholic

world and the Marxist-based socialist and communist movement found common ground in social commitment and the desire to improve society, intending to meet the deepest needs of humankind (Saresella 2014). Vietnam represented an occasion for both these worlds to exchange ideas on an issue that was troubling peoples' consciences because of the violence to which the Vietnamese people were subjected.

The Holy See's interest in Indochina had begun when, in 1954, the Viet Minh army, headed by Vo Nguyen Giap, won the battle of Dien Bien Phu, obliging France to negotiate the Geneva agreements. After the war, many Catholics migrated to the south, where a pro-American government ruled. Interest was aroused again from the mid-sixties onwards, as witnessed by Paul VI's publication, on 29 April 1965, of the encyclical *Mense Maio*, written after the Gulf of Tonkin incident and the decision by the American President, Lyndon B. Johnson, to step up open warfare with communism (Depuy 1981; Santagata 2016).

The issue of peace—in the wake of *Pacem in terris*—and the Vietnam War were themes focused on by Paul VI, who proposed that the Church should act as a mediator between the parties concerned. In a speech before the UN on 4 October 1965, the Pope stated:

The Catholic Church has assumed greater responsibility in serving the cause of peace, by solemnly upholding the case for it. It is certainly not our task or our intention to enter the field of politics or economics, where that earthly order constituting civil peace is constructed. But we can and must help to build civil peace by means of assiduous moral support and, in some way—that of practical charity—a real and material one, too.¹

In his radio message at Christmas 1965, quoted in the Holy See's daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Pope again spoke on this theme:

Brothers and friends! Listen sincerely to the message of peace that Christmas brings humankind. Be sure of the direction your steps lead you! Perhaps you are taking the wrong path again! Stop and reflect. True wisdom lies in peace; true peace is in the alliance of love.²

In the last few days of December 1965, Paul VI sent a message of peace to the government figures involved in the Vietnam issue—Mao Zedong, Podgornij, Johnson, Ho Chi Min and Nguyen Van Thieu—asking them to make every effort to end the conflict and suggesting that Vatican diplomacy should take an interest in negotiating an agreement, in the belief that fair rules from the Holy See might be accepted by all the parties concerned. In addition, the Pope made some generous offers of aid to the victims and to meet the needs of the populations affected by the war and encouraged *Caritas* to organize aid operations inside Vietnam—initiatives that were appreciated by the Italian communist press.³ Clearly referring to the war in Indochina, in his encyclical *Christi Matri* of 15 September 1966, Paul VI urged the various parties concerned to take part in “loyal negotiations” (Chenaux 2015; De Giorgi 2015).

In September 1966, Monsignor Sergio Pignedoli was appointed President of the “Extraordinary Conference of Viet Nam's Episcopate”, and the following month, Paul VI sent him to Saigon, in the hope that he might be allowed to continue his journey to Hanoi. This hope proved to be in vain but Pignedoli did cooperate on drawing up the South-Vietnamese episcopal conference's closing document urging Catholics to unity and ruling that ecclesiastics should keep their distance from political life; moreover—and this was a new element—it allowed Catholics the freedom to belong to

¹ Siamo pronti a tentare tutte le vie per conservare la pace, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 117 (5 febbraio 1966): 209.

² Messaggio natalizio, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 dicembre 1965.

³ Vietnam. Aggravamento del conflitto militare, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 117 (15 Gennaio 1966): 199–208. The Pope's gesture of donating 50,000 dollars to Caritas was appreciated by the communist press; see Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, La lettera del Papa per i soccorsi al Vietnam, *L'Unità*, 27 novembre 1965; Quattro appelli di Paolo VI sul Vietnam, *L'Unità*, 2 gennaio 1966; Spartaco Marangoni, Unità socialista e dialogo con i cattolici, *Rinascita* 28 (1° gennaio 1966): 7–8.

non-Catholic parties, provided they offered guarantees of religious tolerance and respect for all people.⁴ Mons. Agostino Casaroli, who was head of special ecclesiastical affairs from 1967 onwards, did not fail to assure his support for creating the conditions for negotiations, attempting to keep talks going between the parties involved (Melloni 2006).

It is interesting to observe that Paul VI's positions on the war proved different to those of the unbending tradition; his contributions lacked the thesis, repeatedly expressed by Popes with regard to the wars of the twentieth century, that the conflicts were moments of expiation for collective sin committed by a modern world no longer headed by the Church. Like Pope John XXIII, Giovanni Battista Montini did not believe that the Church should merely take on the role of peace-seeker, but thought that its task was to act for the common good. Vatican diplomacy, defined as "imperial rather than national" by the historian Andrea Riccardi, provided support for this project because, despite its limited resources, it maintained relations with all areas of the world (Riccardi 2003). The Pope's attempt to stand as an impartial third party had to take into account on the one hand the more conservative positions expressed, amongst others by the U.S. Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman, and on the other by the Vietnamese clergy. The latter openly supported the government in Saigon, to the extent of spreading rumours of the Madonna appearing to Catholics in the North, exhorting them to leave the communist country (Tra Tam Tinh 1975; Hebblethwaite 1993).

A critical spirit also existed amongst Italian bishops towards positions of the Holy See that were regarded as over-cautious: in particular, we might recall the figure of Archbishop Giacomo Lercaro, removed from his post as Bishop of Bologna in February 1968 for having accused the American government of massacres perpetrated during the Vietnam War (Bedeschi 1968; Beretta 1998). Lercaro had been bold enough to establish a dialogue with the Emilian city's communist mayor and taken the generic option encouraged by the Vatican Council in favour of the Church of the Poor too literally. Indeed, the Bishop of Bologna sent a letter to the communist Iginio Cocchi, secretary of Bologna's "Camera del Lavoro" (Trade Union Centre), containing an invocation to peace and justice and clearly expressing his own concept of the Church:

The Church has no illusions. It is aware that the road to peace is still a long one filled with obstacles: it knows that this path demands first and foremost, but not only, the inner purification of our hearts; it absolutely demands practical choices, as well, mutually agreeing to give up certain privileged interests or certain pre-conceived attitudes, imposing profound and liberating modifications in structures and institutions, inventive efforts converging in collective works, in particular at the service of the less fortunate masses and people who are still victims of the economic predominance and economic strategy of others.⁵

Another significant figure amongst the Italian Bishops was Luigi Bettazzi, appointed Bishop in 1963, one of the most significant exponents of the Council's new sensitivity and Bishop of Ivrea from 1966 onwards. In 1968, he was appointed national President of "Pax Christi," an international Catholic peace movement of which he became international President in 1978. Bettazzi, too, did not fail to express his criticism of American foreign policy, in particular the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and in the second half of the seventies he was to become one of the Italian Catholics most involved in close talks with the leader of the Italian Communist Party, Enrico Berlinguer (Barbagallo 2014).

2. Christian Democracy

In the second half of the twentieth century, Italy experienced the deeply rooted electoral advance of the Communist party (which, at its height, in 1976, recorded 34.4% of votes), yet also the strong influence of the Vatican in political life: it was the Holy See (above all, Monsignor Giovanni Battista

⁴ <http://www2.fiu.edu/~mirandas/bios1973.htm#Pignedoli>.

⁵ Letter quoted in full *L'unità*, 28 gennaio 1968.

Montini) that urged the foundation of the Christian Democrat party (DC), which governed the country uninterruptedly from the post-war period to the early Nineties, and in the years of the Cold War stemmed the spread of communism in Italy (Chenaux 2009). For a long time, the DC was thus the political organization most widely voted by Italian Catholics, sensitive to the social question on the wave of Catholic social doctrine, but also the party that gathered most consensus from the moderate part of society that feared the popularity of the communist party, a party linked to Moscow—at least up until the seventies.

The Christian Democrat party was always marked by strong internal debate, an expression of the different spirits that distinguished Italian Catholicism: the left-wing element, which has its origins in the Dossetti thought (Pombeni 2013),⁶ was fundamental and encouraged the party to open up to political cooperation with the Socialist party; this occurred in 1963 with the first Centre-Left government headed by Aldo Moro (Giovagnoli 1994). Questions of international politics also raised lively debate in the party: whilst it was true that the majority believed Italy should identify with a pro-Atlantic position, there were certainly those who evoked the possibility of a “third way” at an equal distance from both of the two blocks and justified by Italy being the seat of a supra-national entity like the Vatican.

As to the issue of the Vietnam War, within the Christian Democrat party differences of opinion were not lacking, between Moro’s pro-Atlantic stance with his declared “understanding” for U.S. politics (Formigoni 2016), and that of Amintore Fanfani, a friend of Giorgio La Pira, who encouraged the Florentine Catholic to take action and look for a diplomatic way out of the crisis. In fact, La Pira, in his youth close to Dossetti, mayor of Florence between the sixties and seventies, had always been committed to an attempt to find elements for discussion between opposing parties and to the organization of meetings between Israelis, Palestinians, Algerians and the French, westerners and Soviets. In 1959, La Pira had visited Moscow with the intention of promoting a dialogue between the great powers; in 1964, he went to the United States and the following year to Hanoi where, on 11 November, he met Ho Chi Minh. The initiative for the journey was no doubt personal but Fanfani, then Foreign Minister of Moro’s government, was immediately informed.

On his return to Italy, La Pira elected to be the bearer of a message from the Vietnamese leader, destined (through Amintore Fanfani, then President of the United Nations Assembly) to reach the American Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, and President Johnson. The Hanoi leadership informed Washington of its availability to negotiate a solution to the conflict on the basis of the Geneva agreements and without making the preliminary withdrawal of American troops a condition: with the removal of this vital point, it was possible to start off along the path of negotiations. La Pira’s attempt at mediation did not, however, lead to a successful outcome, since several of the American President’s collaborators did not believe in the possibility of an agreement. All hope was lost when, on 15 December, American bombers hit important military targets in Haiphong (De Giuseppe 2001).

La Pira’s opinion of U.S. politics was highly critical: in a letter to Francesco De Martino, an important exponent of Italian socialism, he wrote: “the world situation is growing more serious: the military are now at the helm of the ship of America: and now? And Italy? Still associated with this accursed American adventure that grows more irresponsible and tragic day by day? Fanfani does what he can: but Italy? And Nenni? And the socialists as such?”⁷ And again, “The American situation truly borders on folly; when the pilot of the world goes mad, the world may be led into the depths of the abyss.”⁸

⁶ Giuseppe Dossetti (1913–1996) was an exponent of the left wing of the DC; open-minded to dialogue with the Socialist Party and Communist Party, he abandoned politics in 1951, during the Cold War period. After becoming a monk, he founded the Piccola famiglia dell’Annunziata. He died in 1996.

⁷ Letter from La Pira to De Martino, s.l. 23 febbraio 1967, in Archivio la Pira (Firenze), filza XX, fasc. 21, doc. 1.

⁸ Letter from La Pira to De Martino, s.l. 18 novembre 1967, in Archivio la Pira (Firenze), filza XX, fasc. 21, doc. 4.

La Pira remained in the Christian Democrat party all his life, though at times taking a critical stance. Ermanno Dossetti, too, brother of the more famous Giuseppe and close to the spiritual feeling of Archbishop Lercaro, did not abandon the party but, after having spoken several times in the House in defence of the Vietnamese cause, decided not to stand again for a seat in Parliament. Other believers decided instead that they must break with the Catholic party: among them was Corrado Corghi, regional secretary of the DC in Emilia Romagna from 1956 to 1966, who announced his resignation from the party in September 1968. In an interview he gave to an Italian magazine, he stated that he was convinced that “an authentically Christian attitude” implied “a rebellion against the present world situation and a demand for radical changes;” it was necessary to come to “a conscientious objection towards a whole system that was made operational in society by the ‘violence of money’”, quoting as an example the Vietnam War, towards which the Christian Democrat party had assumed an “ambiguous” position. Instead, he hoped for a “unity of militancy and action amongst believers and non-believers, because an authentically human revolutionary ideal was not necessarily on the side of either a religious view or a secular one.”⁹

Another symbol of the turmoil in those years was to be found in Lidia Menapace, who decided to resign from the DC, convinced that the party had now become a “conservative party”, also quoting as proof the “understanding” that Moro had shown towards the American war in Vietnam.¹⁰ In an article that appeared in the magazine *Settegiorni*, Menapace thus opened up a dialogue between Catholics and the left-wing world, convinced that there were many elements to be shared by starting out from the issue of peace.¹¹

3. The Catholic World

Important voices from the world of Italian Catholics came from the intellectuals who gravitated around the journals, some of which linked to the ecclesiastic Institution (*La Civiltà cattolica* was the Jesuit journal, founded in 1850), with others appearing in the second post-war period, often as an expression of the more open and progressive elements of the Catholic world. Standing out amongst them was the Florentine monthly review *Testimonianze*, founded in 1958 within more committed and radical Catholic circles that had seen their religious and cultural genesis in La Pira’s pacifism. From 1966 onwards, the journal gave space to the Vietnam War, calling into question the legitimacy of America’s escalation. One editorial in particular (by the editor of the journal, the Piarist, Father Ernesto Balducci), which appeared in the September 1967 issue, thus coming after the publication of the encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (26 March 1967), analysed the relationships between the great powers and the reasons why the contrasts were growing keener:

The policy of coexistence is experiencing a crisis today because of a number of aspects, but of them all an important one laden with consequences is the economic and military inferiority of the socialist countries . . . compared to the American superpower. This inferiority—together with the processes by which Soviet society is catching up with western models of industrialism and technology, with the relative political consequences—has determined a break in the balance on which co-existence was grounded in the years of Kennedy and Krushchev and has encouraged the United States in their hegemonic and aggressive politics at all levels, from the economic to the military.

⁹ Una nuova strategia. Intervista con Corrado Corghi, *L’Astrolabio*, IV (29 settembre 1968): 12–14. On this occasion Corghi received a letter expressing friendship and esteem from the Communist party member Lucio Lombardo Radice (Cfr. Carte di L. L. Radice, in Archivio Istituto Gramsci, scatola Dialogo (2)).

¹⁰ Le dimissioni della Menapace: verso la fine della mistificazione della sinistra Dc, *Questitalia*, 11 (luglio 1968): 39–44.

¹¹ Lidia Menapace, Sinistra vecchia e nuova, *Settegiorni*, 2 (24 marzo 1968): 18. *Settegiorni*—published in Rome from 1967 to 1974—was a weekly magazine expressing the positions of the left-wing Catholics.

The Vietnam War demonstrated that the USSR was unable to stem American military aggression on the terrain of diplomacy, nor was it managing to contain the imperialist drive of the United States.¹²

The international context was therefore of central interest and its dynamics and protagonists were analysed in an attempt to understand the genesis of the existing tensions. In the journal *Relazioni sociali*, founded in Milan in 1961 (Saresella 2005), the editor, Emanuele Ranci Ortigosa, stressed that at the basis of U.S. foreign policy there was a “dilated version” of Monroe’s doctrine, affirming “the territorial continuity of America’s national interests throughout the five continents:” to stem the spread of communism, the Americans felt justified in intervening in any context, becoming “the judges and gendarmes of the world.” Responsibility for the war came from both sides, because both Hanoi and Saigon had violated the Geneva agreements; but most of the blame was to be attributed to the United States, who had prevented the start of peace talks by failing to halt bombing in the North. According to Ranci Ortigosa, a compromise must be reached that recognized the neutrality of the South, guided by a government that guaranteed pluralism and political dialectics.¹³

The opinion of *Testimonianze* was more radical, as it criticized not only American foreign policy, but also the capitalist system which—according to the review—was the engine of it and determined it: as well as removing Johnson from the leading position in American politics, it was thus necessary to defeat “the capitalist and imperialist forces that were irresponsibly driving the United States and the whole world towards the third world war.”¹⁴ The words to be read in the journal in 1967 are particularly incisive:

Pressing the trigger of a machine gun or the button in a fighter bomber is merely the last gesture in a complex and detailed production line which, in our civilization—so highly industrialized and marked by the division of labour—has its terminal in military organization but its roots in the economic, social and political structure that we all contribute towards determining.¹⁵

Radically negative opinions of U.S. policy in Southeast Asia were shared by many other journals and groups all over Italy. Indeed, starting around the mid-sixties and encouraged by the reflections of the Second Vatican Council, many believers began to think about the planet’s north–south relations, about poverty and exclusion, giving rise to communities that mostly remained tied to the parishes but at times energetically criticized the ecclesiastic Institution. The group “Gioventù studentesca” of Trento, consisting of students from high schools and universities, grew up in a particularly lively territorial context, where Catholicism had assumed a progressive and often radical nature; in a pamphlet, the group placed the Vietnam War in relation to the economic and hegemonic interests of capitalist economy:

It has rightly been observed that America is not in Vietnam on its own or just for itself but is there with the complicity of all of us who belong to an advanced industrial civilization. America is not in Vietnam just to conserve or control markets: this justification is not enough. It must be added that the whole of advanced industrial civilization in some way desires the economic control of the Third World (Boato 1969).

The conviction that the United States bore the sole responsibility for the conflict was challenged by Father Piero Gheddo, a priest and missionary, editor of the review *Le Missioni cattoliche* (founded in 1895 by the “Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere”—PIME), which agreed that the first step towards a solution of the hostilities was to put an end to the bombing because war was of no use in solving “political and ideological contrasts;” he warned, however, that European communism was not comparable to

¹² Testimonianze, Editoriale, *Testimonianze*, X (settembre 1967): 546.

¹³ Emanuele Ranci Ortigosa, Costo umano e responsabilità politiche del conflitto vietnamita, *Relazioni sociali*, 1 (1967): 16–24.

¹⁴ Reply from the editor in *Testimonianze*, X (settembre 1967): 830.

¹⁵ G. Jannuzzi, Danilo Zolo, I cattolici italiani chiedono la fine della guerra, *Testimonianze*, X (gennaio 1967): 17.

Asian communism, because the former was now partly “tamed” and it was possible to dialogue with its supporters, whilst the latter was still “in its bloody, revolutionary stage.”¹⁶ Gheddo’s analyses prove important not only in their negative judgement of the ideological extremism of Vietnamese communism, but above all in the explicit acceptance by a PIME missionary of a dialogue with the left-wing parties in Europe, in the very years when an attempt was being made to create openings from both a theoretical and a political point of view.

Perplexity over the radical politics of the Vietcong was also shared by the journal *Studium*, launched at the beginning of the twentieth century as an expression of the Federazione degli Universitari Cattolici (Federation of Catholic University Students, an off-shoot of Azione cattolica):

Vietnam is the terrain on which the greatest world powers test their strength, more or less directly, at the expense of populations that fall under fire from one side or the other, without knowing exactly why. But we would not have said all there is to say, if we failed to mention that the populations the Vietcong relied on to carry out a general uprising did not make a move. Indeed . . . the cruelty of the guerrilla fighters provokes the opposite reaction: the South Vietnamese do not want to become communists.¹⁷

The diverse interpretations of the Vietnam crisis prompted differing opinions on the Vietcong guerrillas and their relationship with the population. Aldo Bergamaschi, writing in the review *Momento*—an expression of “Catholic dissent” in Milan—maintained that in the Southeast Asian country a war between North and South did not exist, but a clash whose protagonists were “on the one hand a National Liberation Committee inspired by communism and on the other a “despotic and amorphous régime”, disliked by the population, that held out by being “propped up by foreign support” and that presented itself as the only alternative to communism. In his view, the solution was neither “single-party totalitarianism of communist inspiration”, nor the “pseudo-Catholic” fascism “of the Southern governments, with American support” but to combine the freedom of western societies with the socialist countries’ concept of “the common good.”¹⁸ What seems significant is that *La Civiltà Cattolica*, too, assumed different positions to those of *Studium* and that they published the report by Giovanni Rulli, back from a journey to South Vietnam: the Jesuit stated that he had been struck by the lack of support from the people for “the government’s or Americans’ efforts to defeat communism,” because the South Vietnamese considered the American troops as occupiers.¹⁹ The Roman journal also dwelt on the problems of the populations that were involved in this tragedy, despite themselves:

News of the rising numbers of the dead and wounded, increasingly radical destruction and damage, disloyal and repulsive methods, such as attacks on civilian dwellings, reprisals, ambushes and carpet bombing, torture of prisoners and the burning of rice fields troubled public opinion, which had formed a rather vague and imprecise idea of the Vietnam conflict, due to the far-off location of operations and the circumscribed nature of the war.

La Civiltà Cattolica did not fail to stress the reactions by American citizens and in particular those of students, as well as the protest demonstrations and sit-ins organized, which were spreading on the university campuses and in the bigger cities.²⁰

Interest in the fate of the Vietnamese people was also to be seen in the document by the Milanese group “Citoyens”—published in the review *Momento*—in which it took sides against the American “incursions” in Vietnam and more in general against the involvement of the great powers in the fate of the region, because, “the Vietnamese risked being crushed beneath the mortal concern of rival

¹⁶ Piero Gheddo, Viaggio nel Vietnam, *Settegiorni* II (10 marzo 1968), 3.

¹⁷ La tragedia vietnamita, *Studium*, 64 (febbraio 1968): 140–43.

¹⁸ Aldo Bergamaschi, Testimonianza sul Vietnam, *Momento*, 7 (1966): 76–78.

¹⁹ Giovanni Rulli, Impressioni di un viaggio nel sud Vietnam, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 118 (16 settembre 1967): 449–60.

²⁰ Vietnam. Aggravamento del conflitto militare, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 117 (15 gennaio 1966): 199–208.

ideologies.” The document mainly invoked peace, indispensable for the Vietnamese to concentrate on their own development, since for twenty-five years the country had been torn by warfare, poverty and destruction.²¹ It was thus becoming urgent—according to the Neapolitan journal *Il tetto*, which was close to the position of “Catholic dissent”—to take action for peace and condemn the economic, political and moral manipulations that were the grounds for the tragedy:

Even without giving way to conciliatory pacifism, Christians cannot resign themselves to internal incoherence, to the evident disproportions between the violence against the North Vietnamese and the defence of order or the balance of power between nations, which is supposed to justify it.²²

The Catholic journals expressed different opinions on the diplomatic action taken by the Holy See in the conflict. Amongst those who most appreciated this “activism” was *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which emphasized that the Church had established a new stance towards current affairs; whilst, in the past, it had been involved in “world affairs,” with John XXIII and Paul VI it had taken on the role of an independent power. This allowed it to work for the good of humanity as a whole, to be better listened to by people and to become “the voice and conscience of humanity.” If, in the past, the Church had been a “power”—the Roman journal argued, now far removed from any nostalgia for nineteenth-century intransigence—it no longer was now, but merely had a vocation to “serve”.²³ It is clear that the international initiatives aiming at a solution to conflict, particularly the conflict in Vietnam, re-positioned the Roman Institution—albeit with a new attitude compared to the past—amongst the leading players in international politics and contemporary diplomacy, a role that the Holy See did not believe it should delegate to any international organism and once more claimed as its own. The review of the Bolognese Dehonians, *Il Regno*, proved to appreciate the Pope’s initiatives, since they had contributed towards “debunking” the Vietnam War considered by some as a “holy war” in defence of Christian civilization, in the eyes of large sectors of public opinion. The Bolognese journal stressed, instead, that there was no “rational ideological option” “behind the choice of communism” of the Vietnamese people, but “the anxiety of a people fighting its national revolution, and, at the same time, its social revolution.”²⁴

Instead, Paul VI’s position did not persuade the editor of *Momento*, Marcello Gentili, who joined the debate—in a comment to the words pronounced by Paul VI to a group of leading figures in Vietnam on 24 May 1968—expressing profound “disappointment:”

Of course it is right to deplore the suffering of the Vietnamese population due to American bombing. But it is not right for the Pope to speak of this bombing without pronouncing, at least up until now, a severe and irrevocable condemnation of the violation of evangelical and civilian principles brought into being by tragic acts of warfare that have been the cause of growing horror for so long now.

The Pope should have focused on how the Americans, who declared themselves the bearers of Christian values, had “the terrible moral responsibility” for systematically killing civilians.²⁵ A similar criticism of Paul VI’s “ambiguous” position was expressed by Fabrizio Fabbrini, one of the leading figures in Roman Catholic dissent, who, in an open letter to the Pope in December 1967, the day after the meeting between the Pope and Johnson, wrote to the former as follows:

on this occasion we expect You to break your silence on the genocide that is taking place in Vietnam. We expect You to express complete disagreement with the position of the USA,

²¹ Il Vietnam. Dichiarazione del gruppo Citoyens, *Momento*, 11–12 (1967): 59–62.

²² Editoriale, *Il tetto*, 3 (agosto 1966): 3–4.

²³ Siamo pronti a tentare tutte le vie, *La Civiltà cattolica*, 117 (6 febbraio 1966), 209–13.

²⁴ Editorial. Caso di coscienza per la guerra nel Vietnam, *Il Regno*, 11 (15 gennaio 1966): 8–9.

²⁵ Marcello Gentili, Il Papa e il Vietnam, *Momento*, 15–16 (1968): 82.

calling American war crimes by their proper name. This has become more urgent in view of your recent, unexpected, nocturnal and clandestine meeting with Johnson, a meeting that has mortified the hopes of those who fight and suffer for peace (Boato 1969).

In the opening months of 1967, the Maritain circle of Rimini²⁶ had sent a letter to the Pope, urging him to condemn the positions declared by Cardinal Spellman in favour of American intervention in Vietnam (Boato 1969). The group's position was supported solidly by Giovanni Gozzini, an exponent of Florentine Catholicism and amongst the protagonists of the debate between Catholics and Marxists, who, in a private letter (to Antonio Zavoli, leader of the Rimini group) wrote:

I unreservedly applaud your letter to the Pope . . . Work is needed to avoid manifestations such as yours from remaining isolated, almost in the shadows, but to connect them, so that they become the joint and organic expression of a Catholic opinion that is no longer the prerogative of scattered minorities in our country.²⁷

In a letter sent to Father David Maria Turoldo (of the Servite Order) in January 1968, Gozzini urged him to spread indignation amongst believers towards Spellman's position, and hoped for "an operational connection between the various groups, particularly of "young people," to make their protest heard by the Holy Father.²⁸ In those years, polemical positions towards Spellman were a characteristic of many Catholics; in a document by the Bernanos group of Milan—founded in the context of the Università cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Catholic University)—entitled *Veglia di penitenza e di speranza per il Vietnam (A Wake of penitence and hope for Vietnam)*—written in Lent 1968—we read: "The Cardinal's words are a source of pain and indignation everywhere and by reaction lead Catholics to a more severe criticism of their own responsibility in the conflict".²⁹

The Pope was blamed for failing to openly condemn the pro-American positions of some Catholics; but the journal *Relazioni sociali* went a step further and stressed that the ecclesiastic Institution condemned the materialism of consumer society in words, whilst in practice remaining an integral part of the system:

From the parish priest who preaches anti-communism using a crusading tone, to the prelate who pays court to the rich industrialist to obtain financing; to the military priest pursuing a "career", to the Bishop who has time to attend official inaugurations but not to receive a dissident group or visit an "occupied" factory; to the curial offices that manipulate share packets and property, to the episcopal conference that finds the words to condemn what happens in Czechoslovakia or Biafra but avoids giving an opinion on Vietnam: at all levels of the hierarchical ladder there are evident symptoms of the tangle of principles and interests in which the Church's presence is involved in our society.³⁰

According to *Relazioni sociali*, the ecclesiastical hierarchies had already chosen their side in their support for the Christian Democrats, a party for which the journal reserved considerable criticism: it was heavily responsible for the "failure to develop democracy in Italian society, the permanence of serious imbalances in the economy, in society and in Italian foreign policy," which was too compliant with the United States. In particular the DC had not distanced itself from American intervention in Vietnam, sharing with the "aggressors" the moral responsibility for the people's genocide.³¹ The journal

²⁶ The cultural circle Maritain of Rimini belonged to the category of those spontaneous groups that took part in the coordination meeting held in Bologna on 28 February 1968 and gave rise to "Assemblea dei gruppi di impegno politico-culturale per una nuova sinistra".

²⁷ Letter from Gozzini to Zavoli, Firenze 8 gennaio 1967, in Archivio Mario Gozzini, at the Istituto Gramsci in Florence (temporarily placed), busta 86d, 4.1)

²⁸ Letter from Gozzini to Turoldo, Firenze 8 gennaio 1968, Archivio David Maria Turoldo, presso Priorato di Sant'Egidio (Fontanella di Sotto il Monte), letter to Turoldo, UA T 5 (1967).

²⁹ The Bernanos group's material in. Fondo Luisa Muraro. in INSMI (Milan), b. 10, F. 68, 71.

³⁰ Editorial, *Dissenso civile e dissenso nella Chiesa*, *Relazioni sociali* 10 (1968): 362.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

emphasized the contradictions in the Italian “Catholic party”, which was supporting a war that no Christian could ever have approved of.

One of the most significant experiences of “frontier” Catholicism in those years was undoubtedly that of the Isolotto church in Florence, which accepted the Council’s recommendations and interpreted them in a more radical fashion, resolutely siding with the poor and, in the wake of the *Populorum progressio*, condemning the exploitation of the south of the planet by the Western capitalist world. The Isolotto community, guided by Don Enzo Mazzi, also took action against the Vietnam War, organizing protest wakes and prayers for peace. The Florentine example was followed by many parishes around Italy: in 1968 the Franciscan Brothers of the church of San Ferdinando in Milan organized a prayer wake for “Vietnam and oppressed peoples”. In one of their leaflets the Milanese Brotherhood wrote:

The existence of vast guerrilla action in Latin America, Asia and Africa, the battle that pits black people against the rule of the white, the unrest of the Spanish, the over twenty years of fighting by the Vietnamese, seem to be the beginning of a now irreversible process. The poor no longer knock on the doors of the rich, no longer ask to be allowed to share the well-being of western society; they wish to be the first to build a more human society.³²

Proof of the mobilization of the Catholic world in Milan also came from the almost one thousand signatures collected by young people from the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore “so that the Italian government applies sufficient pressure on the USA to suspend the bombing of Vietnam.”³³ On New Year’s Eve 1968, some Catholics in Rome played their own part by organizing a wake for peace in Vietnam in Piazza San Pietro but were arrested and taken to the State Security police station; they were told there that the order for the forces of law and order to intervene had come from the Secretary of State. On behalf of the whole group of believers, Fabrizio Fabbrini wrote as follows in a letter to the Holy Father, asking him to deny the insinuations and adding:

You thought that our intentions were impure, that we were violent elements disguised as non-violent: perhaps enemies of the Church disguised as the faithful. We are ready to dissipate any such suspicions You may have. Yet, not even if we had been enemies of the Church, should we have been treated in this way. A Christian, a Pastor, treats his enemies gently. And I could never believe that the Vicar of Christ, the Good Shepherd, would make use of police methods (Boato 1969).

The themes we find in the leaflets and posters published over these years thus share invocations to peace, with particular attention to the situation in Indo-China, the request for greater attention to the problems of the Third World, the establishment of the need for the Church, in compliance with the Council’s declarations, to make a clear choice in favour of the poor and to abandon its hierarchical and authoritarian concepts. Young Catholics shared many of these concerns with their peers involved in the left-wing movements, with whom there were several significant exchanges and joint demonstrations in those years. Whilst it is true that in the early sixties, particularly after the publication of a book edited by Mario Gozzini, *Dialogo alla prova (An Attempt at Dialogue, 1964)*, a debate had begun between Catholic and Marxist culture, in the early seventies the Salesian Giulio Girardi—one of the leading theoreticians of the “dialogue”—maintained that for believers “Marxism was no longer a position held by the other, to be studied sympathetically, but was part of their own position.”³⁴ In these years so crucial to the history of twentieth century, two cultures that had been opposed and generally hostile to one another

³² The text of the leaflet is quoted in *ivi.*, 349–50.

³³ The episode is reported in (eds. Gianvito Jannuzzi e Danilo Zolo), *I cattolici italiani chiedono la fine della guerra: Lettera da Saigon, Testimonianze*, 91 (1967): 17.

³⁴ Girardi’s words are quoted in *Cristiani per il socialismo, Document 24–27 mars 1973*, Fondo Giulio Girardi, Fondazione Basso (Roma), busta 29.

for decades had thus managed to find a way to debate and make the most of their own specific natures, at times even attempting a political and ideological synthesis.³⁵ The Vietnam War represented one of the factors that gave the greatest boost to this *rapprochement*, since it generated dismay and concern between believers and non-believers alike, both involved in the attempt to understand the causes and responsibilities involved in the conflict taking place.

At that time, the cultural world more or less agreed to support openings, even though there were still those who stuck to more conservative positions: Mons. Ermenegildo Florit, Archbishop of Florence, was in contrast with Father Balducci and, with the group from the journal *Testimonianze*, denounced Don Lorenzo Milani's position in favour of conscientious objection and wished Don Mazzi to be removed from the Isolotto community; but it was chiefly certain journals—such as *Rivista romana*, *Lo Stato*, *Renovatio*, *L'ordine civile*—that raised their voices against the new developments going on in the Catholic world and, with regard to international issues, took up positions contrary to communism, stating that they shared Cardinal Spellman's appeals for the defence of western civilization. These critical positions towards Indo-Chinese communism, at first minority voices, were later to acquire greater strength once the conflict between North Vietnam and the United States came to an end in 1975 and with the start of a new war, due to the contrast between Soviet and Chinese interests, that saw a united Vietnam and Cambodia as its protagonists.

4. Conclusions

Historiography has emphasized the central role of the Vietnam War in the international balance of power and the echo the conflict had in the political debates of western societies. This essay shows how, in the Italian Catholic world too, the war in Southeast Asia aroused great interest and became a watershed for the cultural and political changes that came about in the years of the Council and post-Council. Reconstruction of the international dynamics and judgments formulated about the responsibility for the conflict bore witness to a new feeling that was spreading in the Catholic world, generally further away from the visceral anti-communism that had led many believers to support the West and its values in the post-war years. For many Catholics, in the sixties and seventies the left-wing world seemed a possible interlocutor with whom battles for social justice and for a new international balance might be shared. At the time, several believers started to vote for the Socialist and Communist parties and, above all, to call into question the political unity of the Catholics as the Church had wished it to be with its instructions to vote for the Christian Democrats. Although the end of political unity may not have been made legitimate by the Italian Episcopal Conference until the beginning of the nineties, it is evident that the years we have been examining represented a radical change in the political culture of the Catholic world, by then aware of the world's problems and a protagonist in the fight for peace and the liberation of the weaker members of society.

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³⁵ The experience of *Cristiani per il Socialismo*, which came into being in Chile in 1971; the CpS were founded in Italy in September 1973.

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