

GIORGIO NEBBIA, BARTOLOMEO SORGE  
AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE HOLY SEE  
TO THE UN CONFERENCE ON HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

LUIGI PICCIONI\*

ABSTRACT

The Stockholm Conference represented a turning point for the global consideration of environmental issues not only because of the decisions that were made there but also because of its visibility, the forces it mobilized, and its long and painful gestation. Among the many initiatives taken during the preparatory phase, one had the merit of directly involving and mobilizing all the governments of the participating countries: the request to respond to an eight-point questionnaire on the state of the environment in their own country and to draw up a more comprehensive report around the possible form and content of the final declaration of the Conference. In spite of its small territorial size the Holy See made a serious effort to respond to the UN solicitation and provided two competent and thoughtful documents of considerable depth. This was due to the fact that the coordinator of the commission charged with drafting the documents, the Jesuit Father Bartolomeo Sorge, was able to gather around him a diverse and qualified group of experts and was able to benefit in particular from the expertise of Giorgio Nebbia, one of the first Italian scientists to join the Italian environmental movement of the Sixties.

**Keywords:** Environmental diplomacy, Stockholm Conference, Holy See, Giorgio Nebbia, Bartolomeo Sorge.

1. GIORGIO NEBBIA MEETS BARTOLOMEO SORGE

Although not a full member of the UN but only an observer, the Holy See brought to the Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment of 1972 a very original theoretical and political contribution, that was

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\* Università della Calabria. Address for correspondence: [luigi.piccioni@unical.it](mailto:luigi.piccioni@unical.it).

at the level of the complex and harsh debate that characterized the event. Through what dynamics did a tiny entity, not even a full member of the United Nations, manage to carve out such a role for itself?

The question is all the more legitimate because between 1968 and 1970, time when the preparation of the conference was getting into full swing, the Catholic Church was in a state of cultural and political backwardness with regard to the environment, and only a fortunate sequence of events enabled it to make a serious appearance at the Stockholm conference and to respond adequately to the expectations of the organizers.<sup>1</sup>

The catalyst for this breakthrough was the circular letter sent in December 1970 by Maurice Strong, secretary-general of the conference, to the participating countries asking them to respond to a questionnaire regarding the declaration on the human environment to be approved at the close of the summit and to prepare a national report on the state of the environment.

Until a few months earlier, the Holy See would have found difficult to respond, for while in the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world the problematic of the relationship between man, the natural environment and faith had been set since the 1950s with the works of Joseph Sittler and had already become the subject of extensive theological debate in the first half of the 1960s,<sup>2</sup> within the Catholic Church it had remained totally ignored. Within it, no news of Protestant thought on the issue had arrived nor had any autonomous reflection been initiated. *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the leading journal of the Catholic intelligentsia and a semi-official organ for the Papacy, had never published an article or even a simple reference about environmental issues although it was a bi-weekly and very rich in information and reflections on major current topics. Most importantly, no member of the Church hierarchy nor any Catholic theologian had tried to tackle the ecological problem.

By the end of the 1960s, the attempt to establish a connection between Catholic theology and the environmental question thus remained entrusted to sporadic initiatives by figures with no connection to the institutions in which the Catholic thought and the Church policies were crafted. One such figure was the celebrated microbiologist René Dubos, who in October 1969 delivered a lecture at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington that would later be published in 1972 under the title *A Theology of the Earth*.<sup>3</sup> In Italy, on the other hand, an apparently naïve attempt to interest the Church

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<sup>1</sup> I reconstructed this story, albeit from a slightly different perspective, in PICCIONI 2018.

<sup>2</sup> KEARNS 1996: 55-70.

<sup>3</sup> DUBOS 1972.

in environmental issues had been initiated in April 1968 by a merceologist at the University of Bari, Giorgio Nebbia.<sup>4</sup> Nebbia was a Catholic enthusiast of technology, an avid reader of Lewis Mumford and a member of WWF Italy since its creation in 1966-1967. He perceived with lucidity and regret the ignorance and estrangement of the Catholic world with respect to the great question of the degradation of the environment and its resources, but he was at the same time convinced that several passages of the documents of the Conciliar era, such as Pope John's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, contained important indications that could form the basis for an original Catholic vision about the human-environment relationship and an active role of the Church in the solution of environmental problems.

Thus, from the spring of 1968, he began to write to ecclesiastical institutions, cardinals, and theologians posing – first and foremost in theological terms – the problems of a new relationship between man and creation and of a development characterized by sobriety in order to respect environmental balances. These were very simple and respectful letters, based on a question or request for opinion, but always accompanied by Nebbia's articles and excerpts in which environmental issues were explained in a very didactic way. Three of these attempts failed, but in November 1970 one – not coincidentally – succeeded. In this case, the inspiration for Nebbia came from an article concerning the Christian critique of technology that had been published in July in *La Civiltà Cattolica*.<sup>5</sup> The author was the Jesuit Bartolomeo Sorge, an expert on the social doctrine of the Church, adviser and close collaborator of Paul VI and future editor-in-chief of the same journal.<sup>6</sup> In the article the environmental issue was not even hinted at, but the lucid critique of the technological mentality and its dangers, of the risk that the primacy of efficiency, consumption and organization could lead to dehumanization, and the call to the possibility and necessity that Christians through the critique of technology could open new perspectives of liberation and human solidarity, made Nebbia think that in Sorge he could find an interlocutor willing to listen to him and above all capable of accepting his appeal.

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<sup>4</sup> On Giorgio Nebbia (1926-2019) see PICCIONI 2020: 13-31, and the 2015 interview *Giorgio Nebbia racconta: di fumetti, macchine da scrivere, ecologia e altro ancora*, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWbOCV9920k> (accessed September 5, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> SORGE 1970a: 110-120.

<sup>6</sup> On Bartolomeo Sorge (1929-2020) see the autobiographical interview *Uscire dal tempo* (SORGE 1991). He has been active until the end as a thinker and a teacher in the field of the social doctrine of the Church: a largely revised and enlarged edition of his handbook has been published in the very year of his death: SORGE 2020.

Thus, on November 5, 1970, Nebbia addressed Sorge:

I have long been interested, precisely as a professor of merceology, in a critical examination of our way of using technology to produce goods and wealth, without any care for the negative consequences this use brings to the world around us. In particular, as a Catholic, I have repeatedly hoped that Church authorities would express a stance on how we should approach the use of natural resources. [...] Some people (and I personally sympathize with this position, so allow me to send you some writings on the subject) think that we can hope for continence in the use of technology, in the production of goods, especially those that are not indispensable, limiting production to those goods that can assure better life conditions for the poor.<sup>7</sup>

The confidence of Nebbia finally proved to be well placed.

In fact, the Jesuit Father replied to him on November 11 with a brief note in which he wrote that he wanted to read carefully the writings sent to him by Nebbia because he thought it necessary “to return again to such an important subject”.<sup>8</sup> For a month and a half Nebbia did not hear from Sorge, but from what happened in the weeks after his last letter it can be inferred that he appreciated Nebbia’s ideas and teachings. Sorge was in fact the Pope’s principal adviser on matters regarding the Church’s social doctrine – his role in the drafting of the published May 1971 papal encyclical *Octogesima adveniens* is well known – and it is safe to assume that there was his hand in the speech Paul VI gave on November 16 at FAO headquarters in Rome in which is contained the first ever reference to the environmental issue in an official Church document.<sup>9</sup> Since *La Civiltà Cattolica* regularly commented on papal documents and speeches, a couple of weeks later Sorge could publish a commentary on the FAO speech in which he launched into a wide-ranging examination of the environmental problem.<sup>10</sup> The few lines related to “ecological catastrophe” in the pope’s speech were a novelty of enormous importance in a hierarchical structure such as the Church. But Sorge’s lengthy and documented essay was also new in the field of Catholic reflection on the environment. On the basis of current knowledge, it is not possible to document that the stimulus that

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<sup>7</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Giorgio Nebbia to Bartolomeo Sorge*, 4.11.1970.

<sup>8</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Bartolomeo Sorge to Giorgio Nebbia*, 11.11.1970.

<sup>9</sup> *Visit of Pope Paul VI to the FAI on the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Its Institution*. Available at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1970/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19701116\\_x xv-istituzione-fao.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1970/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19701116_x xv-istituzione-fao.html) (accessed September 5, 2023).

<sup>10</sup> SORGE 1970b: 417-426, now in PICCIONI 2018: 80-87.

came from the publications sent by Nebbia to the Jesuit was immediately picked up by Sorge, but this can be assumed. Sorge included a mention of the ecological issue in the papal address and then, with a few more weeks to spare, drafted the article for *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

## 2. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE “SORGE COMMISSION”

Some twenty days later Strong’s circular finally reached the Holy See’s Secretariat of State, and Sorge was instructed to set up a commission to draft both the answers to the questionnaire and the report.

The first person Sorge thought of was Nebbia, as evidenced by a letter dated January 1, 1971, in which the scholar was invited to provide other names.<sup>11</sup>

With this involvement began an intense collaboration between Sorge and Nebbia that would end soon after the Stockholm Conference but which would open to the latter the doors of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the Lateran University, two important institutions through which the merceologist would attempt for a few years to bring ecology to the attention of the Catholic world.

Following partly Nebbia’s suggestions and partly the Secretariat of State’s instructions, the commission coordinated by Sorge turned out to be composed of seven people, three laymen and four clergymen. In addition to Sorge and Nebbia, it included the philosopher of law Sergio Cotta, botanist Valerio Giacomini, Dominican Father Paul-Dominique Dognin, Jesuit Father Philip Land, an expert on developmental issues, and another Dominican Father, Raymond Sigmund, editor of the first draft of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*.<sup>12</sup> The process for the preparation of the two documents involved writing the drafts in Italian by the commission, then a reworking and translation into French by the permanent observer of the Holy See to the United Nations Monsignor Henri de Riedmatten, and final approval by the Secretariat of State, which could in turn reserve the right to introduce further modifications.

The commission met four times. On January 19 and 23 it examined, from a draft agreed upon by Sorge and Nebbia, the answers to be given to the questionnaire. On February 8 and March 1, it discussed the report

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<sup>11</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Bartolomeo Sorge to Giorgio Nebbia 1.1.1971*, now in PICCIONI 2018: 139.

<sup>12</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Bartolomeo Sorge to Giorgio Nebbia 11.1.1971*, now in PICCIONI 2018: 139-140.

that was then drafted by Sorge and Nebbia and sent on March 5 to de Riedmatten.

### 3. A LIVELY DISCUSSION

Of the two documents, the most important and challenging was certainly the report.

It was a 15-page text divided into a foreword, four chapters and a conclusion to which was added a relevant 4-page appendix.<sup>13</sup>

The short foreword made it clear how due to the limited size of the Vatican territory the Holy See did not have much to say about the state of the environment and environmental policies; nevertheless, the peculiar character of its mission allowed it to make a positive contribution to the ongoing discussion. In fact, it believed to be in possession of relevant expertise regarding the “socio-cultural aspects of the problem of the human environment [...] from a universal perspective”.

The first chapter laid the foundation for further discussion by briefly exposing the basics of the environmental crisis: natural resources are finite; increased consumption generates at the same time the depletion of these resources and their pollution; the Earth has the capacity to repair itself, but this capacity is also limited; irrational and harmful exploitation of resources has prevailed so far, but it is necessary to move toward a use of natural resources that considers them to be a human patrimony, but in a universal sense. This means that from now on natural resources must be considered as belonging to all humanity, including future generations.

In the second chapter, entitled “Moral aspects of the ecological problem”, the peculiar viewpoint of the Holy See was enunciated. In the Church’s view, the need to defend the environment did not descend only from material considerations but above all from psychological, moral and spiritual reasons. In fact, the environmental problem was a great problem of conscience: “natural resources are the common property of all humanity; no individual, therefore, no people and no generation can misappropriate them, dissipate them selfishly; this principle of the universal destination of goods and their common ownership is the fundamental rule of the natural order, to which all others are subordinate”.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, according to

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<sup>13</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Bozza di rapporto della Santa Sede alla conferenza internazionale di Stoccolma del 1972 su l’environnement*, 5.3.1971, now in PICCIONI 2018: 144-154.

<sup>14</sup> The expression ‘universal destination of goods’ came from the *Populorum progressio*

the Holy See, in today's interdependent world, the only way to guarantee all humanity and future generations sufficient natural resources, of good quality and equitably distributed, was to manage them rationally, cooperatively, "for one another and never again against one another". In short, banishing forever the spectre of war and national and class selfishness. Thus, in these few paragraphs, the concern for the global environment became part of the conciliar vision and was inextricably intertwined with the issues of development, international cooperation, the fight against poverty, disarmament and peace.

After briefly enunciating the factual and ethical aspects of the environmental problem, in the third chapter entitled "Complexity and universality of the ecological problem", the commission explored in greater depth the political and moral motivations that dictated a shift in the way natural resources are viewed and used. The environmental problem was seen on the one hand as rooted in the inseparability of environment and man, biology and culture, and on the other hand as a global one. From these two features it became a universal problem and a source of anguish and threat to all human beings. To solve this problem, a profound change of attitude was considered necessary, with a new vision of man no longer as the center and master of the universe but as a sympathetic part of creation, aware that his every action has profound repercussions. This change of attitude, first and foremost moral and psychological, was necessary because it was no longer possible to break environmental balances with impunity. Instead, the forms of exploitation that break down these balances had to be reviewed and a "new time of harmonization and reconciliation" initiated. Planetary interdependence meant that the neighbor now had to be identified with all humanity, and the concept of neighbor thus shifted from a solely religious perspective to a scientific perspective and one of universal moral responsibility:

Then appears the fundamental importance of understanding the relations between man and the environment as an understanding of interests common to all men and all peoples of the Earth, and not only in scientific and economic terms, but as a moral instance. In this global view of the ecological problem, Earth's resources of all sorts – and the most important "resource" of all which is man himself – take on a very high value destined to interest even the religious worldview, far more than in the past. The Earth and its resources are given to man so that he may use and guard them in a spirit of universal solidarity, becoming aware of his

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encyclical and was due to the vision of Dominican Father Louis-Joseph Lebreton, one of the most influential collaborators of Paul VI and the main author of the encyclical. The third chapter of CALVEZ 2006 is consecrated to Lebreton.

responsibilities to future generations. The defense of the biosphere, in short, is a commitment not only scientific, but integrally human.<sup>15</sup>

In the fourth and final chapter of the report entitled “Operational orientations”, this outline of a Catholic vision of ecology was concretely applied to the most important environmental problems, identifying priorities and possible solutions. First of all, the ecological perspective made it possible to reconsider some crucial planetary problems and to envisage new and more effective solutions for them, provided that a cooperative and supranational approach was adopted. These problems were then dealt with in detail: the relationship between technology and development, the relationship between environment and population, urbanization, the problem of the countryside, education and the question of peace.

Any solution to environmental problems had to be first and foremost based on a rethinking of technology and development. Quantitative growth as the sole indicator for development was seen as insufficient. On the contrary, it was necessary to learn to “reconcile the improvement of man’s material standard of living with the moral and social urgency of guaranteeing him an environment that permits the integral development of the person”. To do this, it was first necessary to recognize that the rush for secondary needs in rich countries was damaging the environment and at the same time increasingly trapping the poor in their poverty. In this way, paradoxically, technological development and economic growth, instead of alleviating disparities and solving environmental problems, ended up aggravating them. Technology and economic activities should therefore have been based on “actions designed to ensure adequate satisfaction of basic needs for all people” while also assessing their environmental impact. Finally, scientific research was to be “strengthened and directed toward the attainment of objectives that ensure integral human development”. As Paul VI had in fact written in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, “it is not enough to develop technology so that the Earth may become a more suitable living place for human beings [...] Economics and technology are meaningless if they do not benefit man, for it is he they are to serve”.

The problem of the population explosion and its consequences on the global environment was acknowledged, but at the same time birth control programs were criticized and self-limitation through extensive educational work was proposed as an alternative: “each individual and each community will have to morally resolve this problem with freedom and according to conscience in its own sphere”.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*: 148.



Two complementary problems were treated separately in the next two points: that of urban growth and that of the abandonment of the countryside. The distortions, pathologies and injustices of hypertrophic and haphazard urban growth were to be remedied through public choices that went in two directions: downsizing and planning on the basis of models that could guarantee basic services and the preservation of human values. While the cities were growing, the countryside was losing inhabitants and able-bodied workers, and this was a problem both because rural life had positive aspects in itself and because city life ended up becoming fragile without a broad and diversified rural background.

One paragraph was consecrated to education. According to the commission, any change in technological and economic choices would be impossible without the spread of environmental education and without a conversion of scientific and technological education to the goal of the common good.

The last issue was that of war and arms race, which are not only a source of injustice, suffering and destruction but also of environmental degradation: “an integral solution to the ecological problem cannot be separated from a widespread commitment toward universal disarmament and the definitive overcoming and total proscription of war”.

The report was organic and coherent and showed a Holy See eager to give a strong ethical connotation to the environmental problem by showing and exalting on its moral and cultural aspects, as well as by insisting on the relationship between environmental protection and social justice by giving a more humanistic meaning to the concept of development.

The final draft was well-coordinated and coherent, even though it was the outcome of a discussion marked by some disagreements and went through several versions. Sorge himself felt obliged to illustrate these difficulties by adding the four-page appendix titled “Three important points that proved controversial among the members of the commission”. The three points were the option for sobriety, the demographic issue, and the judgment to be made on the concepts of productivity and cost-effectiveness. On these points there had been divergences of view between Nebbia on one side and some members of the commission on the other, particularly professor Sergio Cotta.<sup>16</sup>

In two out of three cases, Nebbia eventually prevailed somewhat. First, Nebbia insisted on the need for rich countries to practice “continen-”

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<sup>16</sup> As can be seen in the notes taken by Nebbia during the February 2 commission meeting. Luigi Micheletti Foundation, Giorgio and Gabriella Nebbia Fund, Correspondence, Iustitia et Pax, *Untitled notes dated 8.2.1971*.

is, to drastically reduce the satisfaction of secondary needs both in order to cause less harm to the environment and to favor the satisfaction of the primary needs of people in poor countries. This position was contested because according to some – we do not have the minutes of the meetings so we do not know who expressed this position – it was an unpopular argument that risked to weaken the report. The end result was a compromise: the issue of environmental damage and injustice caused by the satisfaction of secondary needs in rich countries was mentioned in the draft report, but the explicit call for continence and discipline in consumption that Nebbia would have liked to have had clearly evident and even foundational was referred to only in the appendix.

On the demographic issue, too, there was some disagreement. For Nebbia it was necessary to cite in the document the risks of uncontrolled population growth, but another faction claimed that – although resources were undoubtedly limited – population growth was not a problem and therefore should not be mentioned. In this case Nebbia was successful too, because the solution for the population problem was included in the “Operational orientations” among the six “problems [...] that seem most urgent”.

Finally, Nebbia proposed that the report should contain a critique of the concepts of productivity and cost-effectiveness because “the realization of the goal of producing the maximum amount of goods at low cost can only result in increased exploitation of natural resources and increased waste resulting in a worsening quality of the environment”. In this case he found the opposition of those who emphasized “the morality, almost the duty of productivity in a world that needs increasing material goods”. Here Nebbia didn’t obtain what he hoped for because the report contained no criticism of development understood as pure quantitative growth.

Although the appendix did not disclose the proponents of the various positions, Nebbia’s letters to Sorge of the preceding weeks<sup>17</sup> make it possible to reconstruct the broad outlines of the clash. Nebbia arrived at the February 8 meeting with a draft report in which the various aspects of the environmental crisis and their causes were stated clearly, in substantial agreement with the analyses of mainstream environmentalism: the limits of resources, their degradation and squandering due to primarily profit-driven technologies, the growing gulf between wasteful rich countries and poor countries, the inescapable problem of carrying capacity of the planet and its incompatibility with current population growth rates, the obstacle to any reform posed by the taboo of quantitative growth. This

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<sup>17</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Giorgio Nebbia to Bartolomeo Sorge 17.2.1970*, and the long draft of this letter.

analysis was followed by a certain number of proposals that Nebbia took care to connect to the John XXIII's and Paul VI's encyclicals and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*: new solidarity between man and nature, responsibility for the whole of creation, a new technology and economy oriented not to profit but to the common good, redistribution, solidarity, cooperation and – not least – continence.

This general proposal – the text of which has not been saved in the Nebbia's archive but which we can reconstruct from later correspondence between the merceologist and the Jesuit Father – and many of its operational corollaries were not welcomed from other members of the commission. Nebbia was thus instructed to rewrite the text accepting the objections, but he took up this invitation with a distress. He consequently wrote Sorge a long letter<sup>18</sup> in which he explained how the outcome of the meeting had embittered him and reiterated with many new details and arguments the importance and necessity of the points he had argued. The letter constitutes an important testimony to Nebbia's vision and anticipates the long essay "Per una visione cristiana dell'ecologia" that he would publish between September and October in the newspaper *Il Popolo*.<sup>19</sup> Nebbia agreed to rewrite the report according to the directions that emerged from the meeting, but warned Sorge that doing so would result in a meagre and insignificant text of no value. Evidently agreeing with Nebbia, the Jesuit thanked him and undertook to reinstate as far as he could all the points that had been omitted.<sup>20</sup> After the last meeting of the commission, which was held on March 1, Nebbia and Sorge drafted a final version of the report that retained most of the initial proposals of the merceologist while taking into account the objections of the other members.

From the confrontation between an environmentalist engaged in the effort of connecting ecology and Catholic social teaching as it emerged from the Vatican council and a commission of scholars and ecclesiastics with more conventional economic views there descended, in short, a report of good technical quality and with original and interesting proposals, although at several points weakened by Sorge's necessary mediation.

However, the text sent on March 5 by Sorge to the Secretariat of State and the Vatican observer at the UN Henri de Riedmatten was still provisional because the former would have to verify its consistency with Church

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Giorgio Nebbia, "Per una visione cristiana dell'ecologia", *Il Popolo*, September 20, 23, 24, 26, 29, 1971 and October 2, 3, 1971, now in PICCIONI 2018: 100-122.

<sup>20</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Bartolomeo Sorge to Giorgio Nebbia 21.2.1971*.

teaching and Holy See policy and the latter its compliance with the canons of international diplomacy.

The result of these checks was the final report in French that Secretary of State Jean-Marie Villot sent to Sorge in early June, and which was then forwarded to Maurice Strong.<sup>21</sup>

In the final version of the report a new chapter on the problems of nature conservation within the Vatican City drafted by the Secretariat of State was included, the chapter titles were removed, some important expansions aimed at contextualizing the document in the preparatory path of the Conference were added, the topics of the draft were reorganized by distributing them somewhat differently, the more prophetic tones of the draft were toned down, and above all the section devoted to the demographic issue was deleted. Already softened due to the clash that had taken place within the commission, the organic and powerful reasoning proposed by Nebbia was further diluted by the final editing by de Riedmatten and amputated of such a crucial part as that concerning population.

The transition from the first draft drawn up by Giorgio Nebbia in early February to the draft sent by Sorge to the Secretariat of State and finally to the final report reworked and translated by di Riedmatten thus entailed a gradual loss of incisiveness and coherence from an environmental point of view.

Despite all this – and unlike those of many other countries – the report sent to Strong turned out to be a concise and coherent text made original by its strong appeal to the cultural and moral dimension of the environmental issue. Original and strong were also the well intertwined requests for global cooperation, for the consideration of the environment as a universal and intergenerational heritage, and for a more equitable distribution of resources between rich and poor countries.

#### 4. THE HOLY SEE AT STOCKHOLM

However, the report was not intended for publication. It was to remain – and remained – a document reserved to the Conference Secretariat. Different was the case with three texts that publicly expressed the Church's official vision and position on the issues of the summit: de Riedmatten's plenary address,<sup>22</sup> the Holy See statement of vote on the Conference's final

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<sup>21</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Rapport du Saint-Siège en vue de la conférence sur l'environnement 5.6.1971*, now in PICCIONI 2018: 155-166.

<sup>22</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iusti-

document,<sup>23</sup> and above all the Pope's message<sup>24</sup> read on the opening day of the Conference. In these short texts the theoretical and programmatic achievements of the Sorge Commission, already brought back in the final version of the report to the mainstream sensibility and official positions of the Holy See, underwent further modifications.

This is especially evident in Paul VI's message. Father Sorge had in fact been entrusted with its drafting, and in early May 1972 he delivered the text to the Secretariat of State. He sent a copy to Nebbia too, asking for his opinion.<sup>25</sup> The message read in Stockholm turned out to be completely rewritten and took up only a few points from the Jesuit's draft. In retrospect, it can be said that the differences between the two texts highlighted some attitudes that could foreshadow the Church's later disengagement regarding ecology. Actually, the pope's message retained four basic principles enunciated in Sorge's draft: the intimate closeness of the human-environment relationship, the fact that the environmental issue should be considered not only as a matter of technology but also – and above all – as a matter of ethics and culture, the importance of sobriety, and the fact that natural resources should be considered as a common good of all humanity. Of these four principles, only the first was actually new to the Church and descended from environmentalist culture; the second constituted ultimately a vindication of the Church's specific role in the global effort to solve the environmental problem; the third and fourth both belonged to established aspects of Catholic doctrine and reflected the indications of the Council.

By contrast, the papal message read in Stockholm lacked the initial part of the draft written by Sorge in which the essential elements of the ecological crisis had been stated, albeit very briefly, and contained several new paragraphs concerning major global problems, the distribution of resources, the role of public intervention and planning, and the importance of the action of Third World countries. These additions compared to Sorge's text showed a willingness to embed the "young" environmen-

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tia et Pax, *Intervention du Chef de la Délégation du Saint-Siège à la Séance Plénière du mercredi 7 juin 1972*, now in PICCIONI 2018: 174-177.

<sup>23</sup> Published in *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment 1973*: 64, now in PICCIONI 2018: 191.

<sup>24</sup> Paolo VI, *Message of His Holiness Paul VI to Mr. Maurice F. Strong, Secretary-General of the Conference on the Environment*. Available at: [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_mess\\_19720605\\_conferenza-ambiente.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/messages/pont-messages/documents/hf_p-vi_mess_19720605_conferenza-ambiente.html) (accessed September 5, 2023).

<sup>25</sup> Fondazione Luigi Micheletti, Fondo Giorgio e Gabriella Nebbia, Corrispondenza, Iustitia et Pax, *Prima traccia per un messaggio del S. Padre alla Conf. di Stoccolma*, now in PICCIONI 2018: 167-169.

tal issue into the larger political mosaic made up of the Church's great recent social documents: Pope John XXIII's encyclicals *Mater et magistra* and *Pacem in terris*, the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, but especially Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio*. In all of these documents – as well as in the 1967 establishment of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace<sup>26</sup> – a vision had been affirmed at the center of which were the requests for peace and disarmament, for “integral” development that included both the material and spiritual aspects of human beings, for international cooperation, and for meeting the needs of the peoples of Third World countries.<sup>27</sup>

De Riedmatten's plenary address<sup>28</sup> made this shift from the environment per se to the issues of global social justice, “integral” development and peace even more evident. Of this set of themes, the environment was thus to be considered a new aspect, in a substantially subordinate position. De Riedmatten's address and the statement of vote on the final document differed from Sorge's draft and Paul VI's message also because they referred directly and broadly to the debate that was taking place both inside and outside the Conference sessions. de Riedmatten, for example, emphasized the underestimation of the role and importance of young people by the conference organizers, in part because some of the youth groups present in Stockholm had visibly and authoritatively supported third-worldist stances very close to those of the Holy See.<sup>29</sup> Both in de Riedmatten's address and in the statement of vote, moreover, an assessment of the debate concerning the final document of the conference was made, and criticism was expressed regarding many of its important shortcomings (ethical aspects of the ecological problem, little focus on poverty, scant reference to resources as a common good, social justice and solidarity).

## CONCLUSION

The dialogue and collaboration between Bartolomeo Sorge and Giorgio Nebbia provided the Secretariat of State, the Holy See's observer at the United Nations and Paul VI with the essential basis to properly address the

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<sup>26</sup> On Justice and Peace see CAIRATI 2009.

<sup>27</sup> MENOZZI 2012; FILIBECK 1999.

<sup>28</sup> *Intervention du Chef de la Délégation du Saint-Siège*, cit.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the *Declaration on the Third World and the Human Environment* circulated at the Conference and written by the Oi Committee International (An International Committee of Young Scientists and Scholars for a Critical and Holistic Approach to Development and the Human Environment), now in PICCIONI 2018: 177-182.

Stockholm Conference but also laid – at least potentially – the foundation for the elaboration of a Catholic vision of the environmental crisis.

The commission meetings enriched Nebbia's analyses and proposals but tended to weaken their organicity and incisiveness. Nonetheless, the draft report sent by Sorge to the Secretariat of State recovered much of Nebbia's original approach, which enabled the Holy See to present itself in Stockholm with an original and qualified position on environmental issues. The analyses, proposals and activities of the Vatican delegation in Stockholm – of which Nebbia had been called to be a member – and the strategic role in the Conference of a Catholic exponent such as Barbara Ward combined to give the presence of a small country like the Vatican a visibility and authority otherwise unthinkable.

On another hand, the rewriting of the report by de Riedmatten and the Secretariat of State and – a year later – Paul VI's message to the conference, de Riedmatten's plenary address and the Holy See statement of vote on the final declaration undeniably pushed the specificity of the environmental issue in the background and placed it in a subordinate position within the constellation of economic-social issues that had been consolidated since John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et magistra* and completed with Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum progressio*.

What matters here most is that these three documents foreshadowed the difficulty of the Vatican leadership in fully understanding the environmental issue and taking it up appropriately. In the following years, in fact, the already weak signs of the Catholic Church's interest in ecology that had appeared between the beginning of 1970 and the second half of 1972 gradually faded away. It must be said that such abandonment of ecological issues was caused to a considerable extent by a strong fear that the strengthening of environmentalist visions and policies would favor the success of birth control initiatives to which the Church was strongly opposed,<sup>30</sup> but certainly the persistent unpreparedness and lack of sensitivity to the environmental issues showed even after the Stockholm Conference by Catholic theologians and the Vatican hierarchies played an equally strong role.

Giorgio Nebbia's attempt to bring the Catholic Church to embrace environmentalism and to become a protagonist in the effort to save the Earth ensured, in short, that the Holy See succeeded in taking a visible and authoritative role in the 1972 U.N. Conference but failed to go much further. Thanks to his involvement in the Sorge Commission and then in the Vatican delegation to Stockholm, Nebbia obtained the privilege of being

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<sup>30</sup> About this topic see SÈVEGRAND 1995; BETTA 2011: 949-974; TURINA 2013: 20-35; MARENGO 2018.

appointed among the 15 full members of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and the assignment to teach ecology at the Pontifical Lateran University. In both cases, however, his efforts failed to sow the seeds of environmentalist awareness and commitment in the two institutions, from which he then departed after a few years, quite disappointed.

In spite of this, the scholar never gave up discussing ecology with Catholic men, women, groups and authorities and continued until his last days to observe the evolution of the Church's thinking regarding the environment. Above all, he never set aside the analyses, arguments and proposals emerged in the fertile dialogue with Father Sorge and recasted in the September 1971 essay "For a Christian Vision of Ecology". Here Nebbia reorganized, expanded and deepened all that he had written in the first two months of 1971, setting out in clearly all that he would have liked to see present in the Holy See's report to Maurice Strong. The essay was republished the following year in the journal *Ecologia*,<sup>31</sup> but this time, too, it remained without follow-up: few in the Catholic world read it and no one thought of making it the basis for an "ecological conversion" of the Church.

After six years of total oblivion<sup>32</sup> a new sign of attention for ecology by the Holy See was given by some hints contained in the 1979 John Paul II's *Redemptor hominis* encyclical. Then, this taking charge would evolve steadily but through rather cautious steps under the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI.<sup>33</sup> Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* would take the Church's commitment even further in 2015 by making it more explicit and solemn and anchoring it more consciously in the knowledge and perspectives of environmental science and environmental movements.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> NEBBIA 1972: 4-16, now in PICCIONI 2018: 100-122.

<sup>32</sup> The publication of the lecture *A New Creation? Reflections on the Environmental Issue*, delivered in December 1972 by Barbara Ward at the Roman Curia (WARD 1973) closed the first wave of official involvement of the Catholic Church in ecology, which began with Paul VI's address to the FAO assembly. PICCIONI 2018: 43-46.

<sup>33</sup> MICCOLI 2007.

<sup>34</sup> BERTINA *et al.* 2013; MICHELET 2016.



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