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THE VATICAN EXHIBITION OF 1888

Paper outline

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This outline is intended to introduce the main points contained in the paper that will be discussed in 2007 Graduate Conference in European History. My paper seeks to throw some light on the historical knowledge about the Vatican Exhibition of 1888 and, by extension, on the study of world's fairs. I suggest that this (small) exhibition could be considered an attempt to modernize values and change the image of the Church at the end of the 19th century, by imitating some characteristics of the (great) exhibitions. Through the celebration of an exhibition the ecclesiastical hierarchy of Rome, helped by laymen from the aristocracy, endeavored to capitalize on the possibilities, on the one hand, of displaying a certain self-image, and on the other, of strengthening the identity of Catholics. More precisely, it propagated an image of the clergy that emphasized the link between clergymen and science. Likewise, the exhibition was presented as an exercise of adherence to Leo XIII and, consequently interpreted, as a proof of Catholics' cohesion.

The Vatican Exhibition held in the context of the *questione romana* or “the reivindication of the Pope's rights as free and independent sovereign”, following one minimalist definition employed by *La Civiltà Cattolica*.¹ The following anecdote is able by itself to depict the anticlerical atmosphere in Italy in 1886, “[...] in Padova portavasi in processione un ritratto capovolto di Leone XIII in mezzo ai sarcasmo ed ai motteggi della plebaglia, dopo di che l'immagine del Santo Padre fu solennemente bruciata sulla

¹ *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 07/04/1887-28/04/1887.

pubblica piazza, senza che le autorità vi si opponessero".² The strife between the Pope and the Italian Government was omnipresent in Italian life since the Breach of Porta Pia on September 20th of 1870. One of the more significant consequences for the new scenario was in economic terms. A powerful description of the new problems of the Roman Pontiff and the believer reactions could be found in the encyclical letter "Saepe, Venerabilis", written by Pius IX on August 5th of 1871, less than one year after the Breach of Porta Pia. At least three exhibitions were organized in the Vatican before the Papal States' loss of independence. In 1859, to commemorate the Pius IX jubilee, a spontaneous exposition was organized with the gifts that had been sent. More than 400.000 people visited the exposition, that was set up without any commission support. If we considered that the 1888's Barcelona Exhibition (Exposición Universal de Barcelona) had the same number of visitors, Pius IX's exhibition was very successful. In any case, none of the three Vatican exhibitions could be compared with that of 1888 in terms of organization, economic benefits or international repercussion, among others.

The Vatican Exhibition was held in the context of the commemoration of the Pope's jubilee.³ All the Catholics of the world were invited to participate in the celebration through three acts. The first one was the celebration of mass in all the parishes of the world synchronized with St. Peter's Basilica on January 1st 1888. The second one was an appeal to visit the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul in Rome, which potentially meant an increase on the Peter's Pence. The last one was the exhibition of the gifts offered to the Pope by Catholic believers. The organization of this exposition was entrusted to an *ad hoc* commission, whose headquarters were in the Italian city of Bologna. To provide a quick overview of the exhibition, that could be clarified and discussed during the conference, I would like to touch on three aspects. First, in spite of its dimensions, the type of objects or the significant fact that it didn't represented the progress of any particular nation-state, the exhibition wasn't organized in terms of particularity. On January 1st 1887 the Commission agreed that the exhibition "will include mainly all the objects concerning the worship and the Catholic religion; and second the objects not reserved for the worship, etc., but coming

² *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 22/12/1884-07/01/1887.

³ The jubilee celebrated the 50th anniversary of the priest ordination in 1838 of Vincenzo Gioachino Pecci (1810-1903), who occupied the papal chair in 1878.

from the catholic believer's art or industry".⁴ It's most revealing that besides art the Commission mentioned industry. Despite the attention given to religion, the Commission classified the objects in a very similar way to the one observed in others exhibitions. In the following table could be noticed the exhibition's classification system:

GROUPS	CLASSES	OBJECTS
First <i>Textiles</i>	First	<i>Fabrics</i>
	Second	<i>Ornaments</i>
Second <i>Objects in metal, wood, etc.</i>	Third	<i>Chalices in metal</i>
	Fourth	<i>Others</i> [altar crucifixes, processional crucifixes, etc.]
	Fifth	<i>Glass</i>
Third <i>Books</i>	Sixth	<i>Worship books</i> [psalters, breviaries, etc.]
	Seventh	<i>Religious books</i> [catechisms, theology, etc.]
Fourth <i>Fine arts</i>	Eighth	<i>Architecture</i>
	Ninth	<i>Painting</i>
	Tenth	<i>Sculpture</i>
	Eleventh	<i>Music</i>
	Twelfth	<i>Others</i> [photography, olive industry, enology, etc.]

Furthermore, different prizes (honor, silver and bronze medals, and commendation award) recognized the quality and help to excite the interest of potential participants. Second, we can find considerable efforts in order to reproduce some of the characteristics of contemporary exhibitions. Probably the most significant example that could be found is a wooden building built in the Pigna Garden, in order to gain 7800 square meters to expose the gifts. A firefighter department was in charge of the Pigna ephemeral building 24 hours per day and even had six water tanks ready to use in case of fire. Third and last, the Commission published an illustrated guide of the Exhibition following a common practice. The fact that the guide was published in, at least, Italian and French, and was profusely illustrated indicates the ambition of having international and social repercussion.

I have suggested that the Vatican Exhibition could be considered an attempt to modernize values and change the image of the Church. First, certain values regarded as moderns by historiography, as scientism, could be found in the exhibition and were emphasized in *L'Esposizione Vaticana*, the official illustrated guide, and *La Civiltà*

⁴ *L'Esposizione Vaticana*, n°. 1, 1887.

Cattolica. Despite the place reserved to science in the official classification or the numbers of scientific samples that could be found in the exhibition, the presence of science and technology was the subject of detailed accounts concentrated on a series of articles untitled “La mostra scientifica del clero italiano”. The articles in *L’Esposizione Vaticana* and the references in *La Civiltà Cattolica* put the emphasis on the inventive capacity of the Italian clergymen.⁵ This series propagated an image of the clergy that emphasized the link between clergymen and science, in an attempt to fight the widespread idea that clergymen were ignorant and superstitious:

Si les beaux arts et les industries du globe terrestre ont, dans cette Exposition, rendu hommage au grand Pontife, la science pouvait-elle rester à l’écart, elle qui, en tout temps, par ses études par ses progrès, par ses découvertes donna aux industries la plus grande impulsion. Mais il appartenait au Clergé Italien de donner le signal et l’exemple, quoi-qu’il soit, de nos jours surtout, le plus attaqué et le plus opprimé”.⁶

On the other hand, the exhibition contributed to the cohesion of Catholics by promoting their adherence to the Pope. The cohesion of believers was a recurrent feature in the pages of official publications. The person of Leo XIII, as head of the Church, assumed a cohesive role that the exhibition magnified: “Le Saint-Père [...] commence par [...] déclarer son contentement de voir tout le Monde Catholique célébrer unanimement son Jubilé, donnant ainsi une nouvelle preuve de son attachement au Siège Apostolique, et de son dévouement à l’autorité du Souverain Pontife”.⁷ Nevertheless, cohesion in itself is an interesting question only if analyzed in relation to the potential of an exhibition and the existence of a deliberated strategy to benefit from it. In this sense, I suggest that the Pope took advantage of the devotion exhibited and used it in order to self-legitimate in the *questione romana* strife. On the other hand, the analysis of the inauguration ceremony and how it is narrated is of great value to acquire a comprehensive view of the self-image

⁵ Some of the inventions that the Italian clergy expose were, in its French version: le planétaire; le néphoscope; l’héliothère; l’anémométraph; le télépomètre; l’anémomètre enregistreur; les astrolabes; le pluviomètre enregistreur; le vaporimètre enregistreur; le pluvio-vaporigraph; le droso-vaporigraph; l’hélioginoscope; le sismographe analisateur; le sismodinamographe; le tromomètre normal; le maréographe; le calendrier mécanique perpétuel; l’horloge populaire; le baromètre; et le thermomètre.

⁶ *L’Esposizione Vaticana*, n°. 16, 1888.

⁷ *L’Esposizione Vaticana*, n°. 9, 1888.

propagated, as “it symbolized those ideals of linear progress and international concord that inspired the exhibition movement, and confirmed the social order of the host nation”⁸:

“C’est le Pape qui entre avec sa suite. Une quarantaine de Cardinaux le précédent. L’orchestre entonne le *Tu es Petrus* du maître Méluzzi. Le Pape s’assied sur son trône. [...] Aux deux côtés du Pape prennent place les assistants au trône: le prince Orsini à la droite, et à la gauche le prince Colonna, qui avec ses cheveux et sa barbe blanche ressort sur ce fond rouge comme une tête du Titien. Près de lui est Mgr. Della Volpe, et vis-à-vis de lui Mgr. Macchi, d’autres prélats viennent ensuite échelonnés en bas jusqu’aux Évêques formant une aile des deux côtés. Près du trône du côté droit est assise S.A.I. la Grande Duchesse Maria Antonia de Toscane; du côté gauche le prince Ruspoli avec la décoration de la Croix de Christ, qui lui a été conférée récemment. Terminée la musique, d’un goût tout classique sur le style de Palestrina, l’Eminentissime Schiaffino, président honoraire de l’Exposition, se présente au pied du trône et lit au Pape un discours, dans lequel, avec éloquence et une grâce de forme, il rend compte de l’Exposition, et en fait ressortir le caractère particulier. [...] Il se déclare satisfait de tous ceux qui ont contribué au succès de cette Exposition; et après avoir rappelé avec beaucoup d’à propos la fête de l’Epiphanie, il déclare ouverte l’Exposition Vaticane.”⁹

In the paper I will be presenting at the Conference I intend to go deeper into the questions I have had the opportunity of present here and introduce other issues, as for exemple the use of the mission’s image. I intend too sketch out some considerations concerning the importance of the study of this exhibition and how can it contribute to clarify the study of international exhibitions.

⁸ Davison, G., 1982, “Exhibitions”, *Australian Cultural History*, 2, pp. 5-21.

⁹ *L’Esposizione Vaticana*, n°. 9, 1888.