

ARTICLE

# Family Ties: Vatican Humanitarianism and Family Reunification at the End of Empire

Erica Moretti 

Modern Languages and Cultures, Fashion Institute of Technology-SUNY, New York, NY, United States and Millicent Mercer Johnsen/National Endowment for the Humanities 2024 Rome Prize Fellow, American Academy, Rome, Italy  
[erica\\_moretti@fitnyc.edu](mailto:erica_moretti@fitnyc.edu)

This essay analyses the Holy See's engagement in the postwar discourse surrounding displaced minors by focusing on the case of displaced Italian children from Libya. Separated from their families and evacuated to Italy at the onset of the Second World War, they were placed in Italian Youth of the Lictor (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio; GIL) camps. In the aftermath of the war, these displaced children petitioned to return to their families who had remained in territories no longer part of the Italian empire. This article shows how the Papal Aid Committee for Assisting Refugees took part in the relocation efforts and contributed to the conversation on family reunification. By navigating postwar aid and forming unexpected alliances, the Holy See not only contributed to reshaping Italy's geopolitical presence in the Mediterranean but also solidified conservative family norms within the international discussion on humanitarianism.

In a 1946 letter to Pope Pius XII, three teenage sisters in Catania, Sicily, asked to be sent back to Tripoli, Libya, where their parents had resided since the 1930s. Having been evacuated to Italy and placed in fascist youth camps in June 1940, the Bonetto sisters had been left for almost two years 'to languish physically and morally in various centres for displaced persons after the end of the war'.<sup>1</sup> Theirs was no isolated case. More than 12,000 children of Italian settlers in Libya had been repatriated to Italy by the fascist government because of the impending war.<sup>2</sup> Now they wanted to go home. Reunification efforts, however, were complicated by Libya's changed status: no longer an Italian colony, it had been under the British Military Administration since January 1943. The land the sisters had moved to as colonisers was not eagerly awaiting their return.

The pleas of children like the Bonetto sisters struck a chord with educators and policymakers who saw recovery efforts after the Second World War as tethered to the fate of unsupervised minors. For a continent left in ruins, improving the physical and psychological conditions of children came to be seen as a move toward stability. According to humanitarians, relief workers, and politicians, the first step in healing children's psychological wounds was repairing severed family bonds. Only with stable family units could each nation reconstitute its social and moral fabric. In Italy, a country grappling with the fall of fascism and the sting of defeat, many of the organisations guiding the

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to express gratitude to the fellows and mentors of the American Academy in Rome for their invaluable feedback on this article. Sorelle Bonetto a Sua Santità Pio XII, Casi particolari-centri di accoglienza. Archivio Apostolico Vaticano (AAV from hereafter), Segreteria di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, Sorelle Bonetto a Sua Santità Pio XII, 7 May 1946, f. 333.

<sup>2</sup> The case of the Italian children of Libya is relatively understudied. Francesco Prestopino, *I bimbi libici* (Rome: Elianto, 2004); Noa Steimatsky, 'The Cinecittà Refugee Camp (1944–1950)', Oct. 128 (Spring 2009), 23–50; Romain H. Rainero, *Le navi bianche. Profughi e rimpatriati dall'estero e dalle colonie dopo la Seconda guerra mondiale. Una storia italiana dimenticata (1939–1991)* (Sedizioni: Mergozzo, 2015), 249–50; Donato Verrastro, 'Lontani dal focolare domestico. La Pontificia Commissione Assistenza Profughi nell'Italia del Secondo Dopoguerra,' in *Fuggitivi e rimpatriati. L'Italia dei profughi fra guerra e decolonizzazione*, ed. Patrizia Audenino (Viterbo: Sette città, 2018), 45–57.

reconstruction efforts saw family reunification as a test of their ability to heal the fragmented life wrought by the totalitarian regime and create a democratic bulwark against a fascist resurgence.

This essay identifies how the Holy See participated as a humanitarian player in a broader global debate on family reunification, in which governments, organisations and agencies jockeyed for influence. Throughout the 1930s, the Vatican had placed the reproductive family at the centre of social Catholic thinking, and emphatically delineated the private sphere as religious, albeit not divested from political influence.<sup>3</sup> During the transition from war to peace, the newly established humanitarian arm of the Vatican, the Papal Aid Committee for Assisting Refugees (Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza Profughi, PCA hereafter), served to secure this space of intervention. Working toward family reunification from its inception, the PCA made overt claims on the family, blurring, as it did so, the boundaries between private and public.<sup>4</sup> As the Holy See negotiated its increased role in postwar relief aid, it forged unexpected – if fragile and incomplete – alliances that contributed to increasing the Italian presence in North Africa at a crucial time for the negotiation of the future of the ex-colony as well as to solidify conservative family norms within international discussions about humanitarianism.

With the end of the Second World War, displaced children across the globe became objects of fierce custody battles among competing interest groups: national governments, international organisations, and humanitarian agencies each sought to secure its own future by guaranteeing the children's best interests. Communities that had been devastated by war, genocide, and displacement came to see children as the critical resource at the centre of population politics, nation-building projects, and humanitarian interventions. Widely seen as a source of hope for the community's future, children became the basis for reconstruction. Each interest group had its own opinion about what best served to protect these vulnerable populations, be it foster care, family placement, or enrolment in orphanages or other forms of collective living.

In the postwar campaign for child-saving, humanitarian organisations and governments working in Italy belonged to one of two main currents, one opting to raise children in institutions, and the other focused on returning the children to their families.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to the collectivist approach of nationalists, Zionists, and child-welfare experts who advocated collective solutions, there was the newfound family-centric approach espoused by a wide variety of thinkers, ranging from British and Anglo-American psychoanalysts and humanitarian workers to Catholic philosophers and organisers, who envisioned reconstructing the private sphere as a barrier to totalitarianism, especially communism. These two competing philosophies imagined the child's best interest to either be upheld by rehabilitating children in orphanages for young refugees or familialist principles aimed at reconstructing society through solidifying the nuclear family. The process of reuniting Italian families such as the Bonetto sisters brought together different parties, namely the Italian government, the PCA, the British Military Administration, and the Allied Control Commission, which all came to think of family separation as a roadblock to moral reconstruction, but had competing ideas about how and where to make reunification happen.<sup>6</sup>

Relocating Italian children took place within the larger debate over resettlement policies for Italian national refugees. Because these refugees were technically 'internally displaced persons' [IDPs], they

<sup>3</sup> James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 59–107.

<sup>4</sup> Among the papers on the funding of the organisation, the return of the Italian children of Libya, and more generally of North Africa is always ranked by organisation officials as one of the primary objectives. *Atti costitutivi e attività, P.C.A. e P.O.A., Pontificia Opera Assistenza Cenni Storici*. AAV, b. 1, f. 11, 2–3.

<sup>5</sup> Tara Zahra contextualises this conversation for continental Europe: Tara Zahra, *The Lost Children: Reconstructing Europe's Families After World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> The assistance arm of the Vatican merged with the Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza Reduci in 1945 and became the Pontificia Commissione Assistenza. I will therefore use PCA in the text. In 1953, it took the name Pontificia Opera Assistenza.

were ineligible for international aid and fell under the responsibility of the Italian government.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, because they had been displaced from territories no longer under Italian control, assisting them became a critical arena for rethinking Italian foreign policy. It also provided an opportunity for institutions – denominational organisations, lay associations, and public groups – to claim a role in the emerging field of humanitarian relief. As the Italian state assumed political and humanitarian responsibility over the returnees, it often required support from nongovernmental and intergovernmental actors, such as the PCA, who were able to intervene in new ways.

In the case of Italy's former colonial children, the humanitarian players reached an unexpected agreement on how to best support them: rebuilding family bonds became a tool to reconstruct societies and raise morally sound citizens. For the Church, strengthening the family corresponded to asserting its primacy over the private sphere as well as finding a space within humanitarianism; for the BMA and the ACC, discourses on the psychological impact of family separation led them to prioritise reunification even in contradiction with other objectives and priorities. For all concerned, reuniting these children with their families would assuage concerns over the damaging impact of both the war and of refugee camps, as well as the spectre of communism.

However, there was no such ready agreement around the question of where reunification would take place. For its part, the Ministry of Italian Africa sought to return the children to Libya as a way to maintain an Italian presence in its ex-colony. The return to Libya also would have had direct and indirect benefits: first, it would have unburdened the Italian government from the subsidies it had to pay to support these children; second, it would have avoided an influx of job-seeking adults into a country whose economy was in tatters. Then there was the long-term question of Italy's influence: Between the end of the war and the Paris Treaty of 1947, the Italian government made numerous attempts to exert political influence over Libya, working to maintain a trusteeship over the regions with strong Italian interests.<sup>8</sup> Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, vicar apostolic of Tripoli from 1936 to 1950, indispensable organiser of this campaign and the person on the ground for the PCA in Libya, defended the Italian presence in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica by arguing that the work done by the Italian settlers granted them a right to the land.<sup>9</sup>

The BMA and the ACC, on the other hand, had no interest in stoking civil unrest in Libya with the return of former colonists to its land and were instead eager to turn the page on Italy's colonial experience. These agencies called to return the parents to the mainland. Yet the conversation on the benefit of reuniting children weighted heavily on both international agencies and national governments, leading the BMA to create an opening for these children and compromise their position.

Ultimately around 3,000 and 5,000 children of Italian settlers were sent back to Libya between 1945 and 1947, mostly through the intercession of the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> Children's resettlement schemes in Libya thus worked to strengthen Italy's position in northern Africa in the months leading up to the

<sup>7</sup> As opposed to 'foreign refugees' (*profughi stranieri*), a term used in Italian newspapers, which has now commonly been replaced with 'displaced persons'. For those returning from colonial territories, their assistance was a shared responsibility between the Ministry of the Interior and the Italian Ministry of Africa, which, according to the High Commission for Refugees (Alto commissariato per l'assistenza morale e materiale dei profughi di guerra), generated confusion and inefficiency, creating an opening for the Vatican. For a thorough examination of the conditions of national refugees in postwar Italy see: Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Post-War Italy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 43–76.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio M. Morone, 'Italiani d'Africa, africani d'Italia: da coloni a profughi,' *Altretalia* 42 (Jan.–June 2011): 20–31; Alessandro Pes, 'Colonialismo di ritorno: i rimpatriati dalle ex-colonie italiane e la questione del lavoro,' in *Europa in movimento: mobilità e migrazioni tra integrazione europea e decolonizzazione, 1945–1992*, eds. Giuliana Laschi, Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2018), 171–208.

<sup>9</sup> On Facchinetti see: Filiberto Sabbadin, *I frati minori lombardi in Libia: La missione di Tripoli, 1908–1991* (Milan: Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, 1991), 65–7.

<sup>10</sup> Recent scholarship appraises the number of children returned to the ex-colony with the support of the Holy See at 17,000. This number remains unsubstantiated. Donato Verrastro, 'Tra spirito e materia. Assistenza, associazionismo e politiche del lavoro sotto il pontificato di Pio XII (1944–1958),' *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome – Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines* 134, no. 2 (2022): 295–309, 299.

treaty; after the treaty's formalised rejection of Italian claims to the colony, Italian settlements served to safeguard the economic interests of the former metropole and complicate Libya's long decolonisation process.<sup>11</sup>

An understudied but significant player in postwar humanitarianism, the Holy See was eager to fill the power vacuum created by Italy's weakened political status. Until now, histories have portrayed the PCA's humanitarian interventions as impartial and non-political, motivated only by the transcendent cause of humanity itself.<sup>12</sup> While consistent with (and stemming from) Catholic doctrine, 'Vatican humanitarian diplomacy' served a political purpose, as this case will show. As part of a broader strategy of political legitimation, the PCA allowed the Church to play a central role in the reconstruction of European society, alongside other major humanitarian organisations.<sup>13</sup>

The Italian children of Libya were thus folded into geopolitical tensions. Using the Vatican's expansive institutional networks strengthened the Holy See's standing within the international community and increased its influence in humanitarian efforts. Transferring the children back to the former colony served to legitimise the Italian presence in the region; more broadly, the PCA's dual treatment of the family as the foundation of a revitalised postwar society and a space in which to address individual needs ultimately worked to maintain pre-existing norms and structures in the Catholic social order.

### Vatican Humanitarian Diplomacy in Postwar Italy

Between 1940 and 1943, Italians were removed from war-affected colonies by the government as a precautionary measure (for the most part, women, children, the elderly, and those ineligible for conscription).<sup>14</sup> The evacuation from the Libyan territory represented the first steps for six million settlers toward returning to Europe. During the first month of Italy's involvement in the war, the children of settlers of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (ages four to twelve) were asked to embark for the metropole. Thinking that the conflict would be a quick affair, officials wanted the children to spend the summer away from the Libyan front. But the war was by no means quick, and almost 6,000 of these children were unable to re-join their parents until several years after the war ended.<sup>15</sup> After May 1945, many of

<sup>11</sup> Italy's decolonisation process has often been characterised as relatively unproblematic, lacking clashes like France's war in Algeria. On the decolonisation process as a non-event see: Karen Pinkus, 'Empty Spaces: Decolonization in Italy,' in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 299–320; Christopher Seton-Watson, 'Italy's Imperial Hangover,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 15 (1980): 169–79. On the notion of 'long decolonisation', which I adopt, see Pamela Ballinger, 'Colonial Twilight: Italian Settlers and the Long Decolonization of Libya,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 51, no. 4 (Oct. 2016): 813–38.

<sup>12</sup> Felice Ricci, 'Pontificia Opera di Assistenza (P.O.A.),' in *La carità cristiana a Roma*, eds. Vincenzo Monachino, Mariano da Alatri and Isidoro da Villapadierna (Bologna: Cappelli, 1968), 333–45; Primo Mazzolari, *La carità del papa. Pio XII e la ricostruzione dell'Italia (1943–1953)* (Milan: Edizioni Paoline, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> On Vatican humanitarian diplomacy see: Laura Pettinaroli, 'The Holy See's Humanitarian Diplomacy towards the Russian World (1914–22),' in *Benedict XV: A Pope in the World of the 'Useless Slaughter' (1914–1918)*, Vol. 2, eds. Alberto Melloni, Giovanni Cavagnini and Giulia Grossi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 1087–1104; Giuliana Chamedes, 'The Vatican and the Reshaping of the European International Order After the First World War,' *The Historical Journal* 56, no. 14 (Dec. 2013): 955–76. On Vatican humanitarianism during Pius XII's pontificate see: 'Religion et humanitaire: renouveau historiographique et chantier des archives Pie XII,' Nina Valbousquet and Marie Levant, eds., *Mélanges de l'Ecole française de Rome – Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines*, 1/1/2023, Issue 134–32.

<sup>14</sup> The decision to evacuate the children from Libya was made in May 1940 in a series of letters from the minister for Italian Africa, Attilio Teruzzi, governor-general of Italian Libya, Italo Balbo, and party secretary of the National Fascist Party, Ettore Muti. Rientro bambini dalla Libia, Archivio Storico Diplomatico Ministero Affari Esteri (ASDMAE from hereafter) Gabinetto Archivio Segreto (1925–1942), Ministero Africa Italiana, f. 270.

<sup>15</sup> Starting in May 1941, a few of these children were reunited with their mothers and siblings, who had returned to Italy thanks to systematic evacuations from various battle and war zones, organised by the government. This policy was meant to safeguard the vulnerable, specifically women, minors, the elderly and the disabled. Between 1942 and 1943, about 28,000 Italians were repatriated from East Africa. Emanuele Ertola, 'Navi bianche. Il rimpatrio dei civili italiani dall'Africa Orientale,' *Passato e Presente* 91 (2014): 127–43; Rainero, *Le navi bianche*.

these children waited for their families in refugee camps in Italy; extended family members eventually welcomed some; others returned to Libya.

The management of displaced persons became a key challenge to the rebuilding of Europe.<sup>16</sup> But the undefined legal status of the refugee stripped the Italian children from Libya of the juridical protection of the international humanitarian organisations. Those returning from former Italian lands – Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, Albania, and the Dodecanese islands – were labelled by international agencies and agreements as ‘national refugees’, while those who had crossed international borders fell under the purview of UN agencies, such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which operated between 1943 and 1947; the International Refugee Organisation (IRO), which assisted refugees from 1946 to 1952; and the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), which started its work in 1950.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Italian nationals displaced from Italy’s pre-war territories had nowhere to turn but to the Italian government, leaving their future uncertain.<sup>18</sup>

The question of where to reunite these families was no simpler for the Italian government, as its diminished political and financial standing shaped its diplomatic stance vis-à-vis the war’s victorious nations. The Ministry of Italian Africa bore their legal responsibility. But the children’s right to join their parents in the ex-colony was contingent on the fate of all Italians in Libya – an issue that, in the wake of the war, created friction between the Italian government, the Allied Control Commission (ACC hereafter), and the British Military Administration (BMA hereafter) in Libya.

Capitalising on the complex situation of coalition governments, the Vatican positioned itself as an interlocutor with other organisations to support affected civilians and non-civilians; filling a vacuum in the humanitarian sphere, Catholic relief missions provided support to those national and international refugees in Italy who were deemed ineligible by international agencies. Established by Pius XII on 18 April 1944, the PCA was among the first organisations to work for the relief of refugees in Italian territory during the Second World War. From its inception, the organisation mobilised to support refugees and displaced persons, as well as to facilitate repatriation operations for both civilians and combatants. It granted subsidies to families in need and made itself available to assist with the paperwork required to be admitted to a refugee camp.

The head of the organisation, Monsignor Ferdinando Baldelli, was no stranger to the world of relief operations; he had led the Organisation for the Religious and Moral Assistance of Workers (Opera Nazionale di Assistenza Religiosa e Morale degli Operai; ONARMO) since 1930. Relying upon an extensive network established with ONARMO, Baldelli put together an organisation that sprawled nationally and internationally through the work of prelates and apostolic delegates. Structurally, the PCA was a centralised institution that heavily relied on the support of the Substitute of the Secretary of State Giovanni Battista Montini; on a day-to-day level, the organisation leaned on prelates and apostolic nunciatures to report on the needs and requests of Catholics in Italy and abroad. North American Catholic organisations were crucial to the financing of the PCA’s relief operations, as well as to its political positioning vis-à-vis the Allied Control. Through the War Relief Services, an agency run by bishops connected to the National Catholic Welfare Conference, the PCA received substantial

<sup>16</sup> On the management of the displaced in the aftermath of the Second World War see: Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron, eds., *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands (1945–1950)* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2009); Gerald D. Cohen, *In War’s Wake: Europe’s Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Nasaw, *The Last Million: Europe’s Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020).

<sup>17</sup> People fleeing persecution (as well as those who met other specific criteria) were under the same purview. Relazione sullo schema di integrazione e riforma dello schema al rdl 29 May 1944, Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS hereafter) Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (PCM hereafter), 1944–1947, 1.1.2/10474, n. 37 s.d. [Oct. 1944], 2.

<sup>18</sup> The 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees formalised this distinction, and national refugees came to be seen as not an ‘international problem’ and therefore not something requiring international protection. Guy S. Goodwin-Gill, ‘Different Types of Forced Migration Movements as International and National Problem,’ in *The Uprooted: Forced Migration as an Internal Problem in the Post-War Era*, ed. Göran Rystad (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1990), 28.



funds. The extensive collaboration with War Relief Services came to constitute a privileged line of dialogue between the Vatican and the Allied Control Commission, facilitating operations that required the approval of the ACC.<sup>19</sup>

While its rhetoric on societal rebuilding through reconstituting families focused on assisting those in need, the Vatican's political imperatives shape this work. The PCA did not take any official position regarding the legitimacy of the Italian presence in the colony but it actively supported the return operations, stressing the urgency of removing the civilian population, especially unaccompanied children, from refugee centres. Both the pontiff and the Substitute of the Secretariat of State Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini supported the position of the organisation.<sup>20</sup> Whereas Baldelli did not address the changing political circumstances, the person on the ground who coordinated the repatriation, Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, vocally supported the Italian presence in the ex-colony based on a presumed superiority of the Italian people.<sup>21</sup>

The process of stripping Catholicism of its colonial baggage and continuing to support the legitimacy of the presence of Italian Catholics in North Africa, as well as their 'civilising mission', prompted complex and often contradictory policies. Only recently have scholars begun to explore how imperialism's dissolution impacted Catholic faith, practice, and institutions and vice versa.<sup>22</sup> Scholarship on decolonisation and the Vatican has illuminated the often ambiguous position of the Catholic Church that both forcibly delayed decolonisation or at times prompted Vatican emissaries in interreligious dialogue through intellectual and pastoral work.<sup>23</sup> It is through studies of small operations that show the support (or lack of thereof) of Catholics at all levels, from denominational agencies to Vatican hierarchies, from small actors on the ground to papal encyclicals, that scholars will eventually be able to provide a more expansive picture of the Vatican's position vis-à-vis decolonisation processes. Rescue operations run by the PCA offer a window into the complex role of Vatican networks at the end of empire.<sup>24</sup>

Small relief operations connected the PCA to large humanitarian players. Vatican relief missions operated mostly through collaborations with UN agencies and governments, offering additional resources to economically drained Western allies. Relying on its wartime diplomatic representatives and the numerous Catholic missions scattered through the globe, the PCA filled the power vacuum, becoming a 'guarantor of national unity and institutional continuity' as it called upon a vast national and international network of chaplains and prelates that provided support to the neediest. As a sovereign state, the Vatican was able to intervene in humanitarian affairs – especially on Italian soil – and

<sup>19</sup> Roberto P. Violi, 'La Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza nel Sud degli anni Quaranta,' *Giornale di Storia Contemporanea* 1 (1999): 58–88.

<sup>20</sup> On the papacy's position on colonialism see: Lucia Ceci, *Il papa non deve parlare. Chiesa, fascismo e guerra d'Etiopia* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2010); Renato Moro, 'Il mito dell'impero in Italia fra universalismo cristiano e totalitarismo,' in *Cattolicesimo e totalitarismo. Chiese e culture religiose tra le due guerre mondiali (Italia, Spagna, Francia)*, eds. Daniele Menozzi and Renato Moro (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2004), 311–71.

<sup>21</sup> Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, *Gli italiani colonizzatori della Libia*, 1. AAV, Segreteria di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, ff. 441–562, 74. Another copy of the typescript is at ASMAE, Ufficio per gli Affari del soppresso Ministero Africa Italiana, 1 (44), folder 15.

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Anne Foster, *African Catholic: Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); Miguel A. De La Torre, *Decolonizing Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

<sup>23</sup> The collection of essays *Decolonization and the Remaking of Christianity* is an example of the disparate responses to post-colonial practices. Elizabeth A. Foster and Udi Greenberg, eds., *Decolonization and the Remaking of Christianity* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

<sup>24</sup> Studies on the Catholic Church and the end of the Italian empire have sprung up but they have been regionally or methodologically confined. Jan Nelis, 'Negotiating the Italian Self: Catholicism and the Demise of Fascism, Racism and Colonialism,' *Italian Studies in Southern Africa* 1–2 (2008): 75–101; Roberto Regoli, 'Pius' Public Magisterium on the Mediterranean World,' in *The World in a Sea: Catholics and the Mediterranean During the Pontificate of Pius XII*, ed. Nicholas Joseph Doublet (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 2023), 30–45; Paolo Valvo, 'Italian Catholics and the Mediterranean (1945–1948),' in *ibid.*, 80–106; Alessandro Pes, 'The Colonial Question Between Ideology and Political Praxis (1946–1949),' in *Colonialism and National Identity*, eds. Paolo Bertella Farnetti and Cecilia Novelli (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 112–25.

its previous charitable endeavours were consistent with its present ambition within the field of humanitarianism.

The participation of Roman Catholic organisations in social assistance, as instigated by Vatican leadership during and after the Second World War, did not occur in a vacuum. The Vatican's theoretical engagement with human dignity, as applied to both humanitarian action and human rights, had begun in the 1930s; doctrines of individual rights had become a central preoccupation within Catholic political discourse, and this trend continued during the second postwar period. At the time, the Church started using a new set of concepts such as human rights, human dignity, and religious freedom to rigorously delineate the private and make it its own, with the goals of gaining political legitimacy and strengthening its geopolitical role through humanitarian intervention and participating in related conversations. The rising prominence of this Christian ideology, focusing on a conservative notion of human dignity and rights, provided the fuel for a realignment of the Vatican's ideological and geopolitical priorities on the international stage. By embracing a new conception of individual human dignity, Pius XI (1857–1939) and later Pius XII (1876–1958) aimed at rejecting the 'statolatric' premise of totalitarianism and finding common ground with liberalism.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the 1930s, the subsequent violence of totalitarian regimes, particularly communism, and their interference in private affairs increasingly pushed the papacy to ideologically confront attacks on fundamental human rights. This shift climaxed in Pius XII's Christmas radio message of 1942, wherein he advocated for the realisation of certain fundamental personal rights, among which was the right to 'maintain and develop one's corporal, intellectual and moral life'.<sup>26</sup> In the speech, Pacelli also mentioned 'inalienable human rights', as opposed to the more common formulation 'rights of the person'.<sup>27</sup> These timid yet significant steps toward recognising the rights, liberty, and dignity of the individual provided an ideological and practical basis for the papacy to gradually distance itself, at least nominally, from its collaborations with fascism and Nazism, as well as to assert a strong anti-communist stance.<sup>28</sup> Rethinking the Holy See's political legitimacy, Catholic intellectuals and politicians worked to define the private sphere as regulated and protected by faith, with the individual at its centre whose rights, nationally and internationally, in times of peace and of war, were guaranteed by the Church. As a result, humanitarian actions such as reuniting the Italian children of Libya with their parents can be considered one part of an array of Vatican relief efforts intended to gain standing in the international community.

### Combating Moral Decay through Family Reunification

The Vatican's repositioning prompted denominational organisations such as the PCA to act in favour of underage and unaccompanied national refugees who ended up in internment camps throughout the peninsula after a journey that would have started in 1940 with their evacuation to Italy and placement in fascist Italian Youth of the Lictor (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio; GIL) institutions.<sup>29</sup> After the fall of the fascist regime in 1943, these displaced minors would have had few choices: some children joined their relatives, some remained in the care of the institutions that had hosted them until then, and a few who had come of age left the camps and joined either the Resistance or the Italian Social Republic. Those, like the Bonetto sisters, who did not take one of those routes, would have been moved to

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Pius XII, 'Christmas Radio Message 1942': <https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/speeches/1942.index.html> (accessed on 29 Apr. 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Daniele Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani. Legge naturale e modernità politica dalla Rivoluzione francese ai nostri giorni* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012), 139.

<sup>28</sup> Daniele Lorenzini, *Jacques Maritain e i diritti umani. Fra totalitarismo, antisemitismo e democrazia (1936–1951)* (Florence: Morcelliana, 2012), 15–23.

<sup>29</sup> On GIL, see: Alessio Ponzio, *Shaping the New Man: Youth Training Regimes in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015); Luca Roveri, 'Totalitarian Pedagogy and the Italian Youth,' in *The 'New Man' in Radical Right Ideology and Practice, 1919–1945*, eds. Jorge Dagnino, Matthew Feldman and Paul Stocker (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 19–38.

internment camps, a solution that was both widely used and viewed with suspicion, if not outright alarm, for its potential to harm internees who stayed too long, especially children.<sup>30</sup>

There was widespread, unexpected agreement on this issue among diverse groups: from the psychoanalytic community to social workers, from clergy in internment camps to government administrators, displacement was widely assumed to lead to apathy, loss of will, indolence, and dependency. At the time, Irish journalist Dorothy Macardle argued that extended ‘monotony, restraint, and lack of affection’ would lead to dispassion and lethargy.<sup>31</sup> According to notes and briefings by organisations in charge of the DP camps throughout Europe, uprooting individuals altered social roles that would sap women of their maternal vocation and men of their will to provide for their families.<sup>32</sup> Children also paid a price, absorbing degenerated moral norms in the absence of parental authority. Those housed in internment camps were often depicted as easy prey for promiscuity and idleness; the war and the dissolute environment it had fostered cut their childhood short, sharpened their ability to lie and steal, and stoked their aggressiveness and inclination to take advantage of their neighbours.<sup>33</sup>

Worries about the psychological health of the refugee became even more prominent as time passed and children remained at these camps.<sup>34</sup> The *Cinecittà* refugee camp on the outskirts of Rome hosted 1,800 ethnically Italian settlers from Libya of all ages, including unaccompanied children. Whenever possible, they lived in small sections of the camp grouped by family unit, considered ‘sufficiently morally healthy’ specifically because the families were intact.<sup>35</sup> But even within the family, observers argued, the child suffered from a promiscuous environment of multiple households sharing spaces that were supposed to be private. According to a report for the Italian Undersecretary of State, the problem of morality

has been getting better while the stabilisation of the elements has taken place, thanks to the surveillance established by management, and especially thanks to the re-education and spiritual assistance offered by the Chaplain, the Sisters and the social workers. [...] The insufficient division of families also affects the little ones’ upbringing (5, 6, 7, 8 years old) who, according to the assistants, are rather precocious and malicious.<sup>36</sup>

In response to these fears, agencies in charge of refugees worked to offer relief beyond immediate physical necessities: rehabilitation, and a holistic (albeit vaguely articulated) approach to transforming refugees into independent and self-sufficient citizens, who were prepared to be re-integrated into the fabric of society.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Silvia Salvatici, *Senza casa e senza paese. Profughi europei nel secondo dopoguerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2008); Guido Crainz, Raoul Pupo and Silvia Salvatici, eds., *Naufraghi della pace. Il 1945, i profughi e le memorie divise d’Europa* (Rome: Donzelli, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> Dorothy Macardle, *Children of Europe: A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries; Their War Time Experiences, Their Reactions, and Their Needs, with a Note on Germany* (London: Gollancz, 1949), 271.

<sup>32</sup> Salvatici, *Senza casa e senza paese*, 72–80.

<sup>33</sup> Though widespread, these depictions often failed to account for the complexity of camp life, which was made up of transfers and relocations, small jobs, training, and educational activities. The diary of Felice Barbieri, one of the children of Italian settlers of Libya who experienced the evacuation of June 1940, depicts the vast array of activities within the camps where he was interned upon the closure of GIL camps. Nicola Labanca, ed., *Medico nel Congo, 1901–1904/ Virgilio Grossule. Il grande trasloco sulla quarta sponda/Felice Barbieri* (Florence, Giunti, 1992).

<sup>34</sup> Salvatici, *Senza casa e senza paese*, 72–80.

<sup>35</sup> *Relazione di Enzo Ministrino a S.E. il Sottosegretario alla Presidenza del Consiglio sul Campo Profughi Italiano di Cinecittà*, 13 June 1947, ACS, PCM, 1944–1947, 1.1.2, 10107, 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Tito Zaniboni, high commissioner for refugees, would stress the importance of rehabilitating refugees. *Modifiche al Regio Decreto Legislativo*, 29 May 1947, ACS, PCM, 44–47, 1.1.2/10407, n. 137, 2. On the rehabilitation for UNRRA see: Silvia Salvatici, “‘Help the People to Help Themselves’ UNRRA Relief Workers European Displaced Persons,” *Journal of Refugee Studies* 25, no. 3 (2012): 428–51.



The corrupting effects of the camps figured prominently in requests from clergy to relocate a specific subset of dislocated children: 'people without an occupation, discouraged, tired, who do not see an end to their condition'.<sup>38</sup> In a report to the PCA on the status of the evacuated children, the vicar of Tripoli, Facchinetti, focused on the damage of family separation and explained that most of the children

have no relatives and are gathered in institutions, boarding schools, concentration camps, where they have languished for over a year, in the most painful vicissitudes, anxiously awaiting. In the meantime, their mothers in Tripolitania have gone mad with pain and the asylum in Tripoli is overflowing with them.<sup>39</sup>

Many of the children openly lamented their circumstances. On 12 July 1946, the newspaper *Il nuovo corriere* reported a demonstration of these young refugees from Libya, describing them as 'homeless and parentless, who had wandered from town to town like beggars'.<sup>40</sup> They had staged a silent and disciplined protest in the centre of the city of Assisi, near the Collegio Nazionale that hosted them, requesting that the Italian government 'remove them from this life of dangerous idleness for the formation of the character of a man'.<sup>41</sup>

Concerns such as these affected the way administrations, humanitarian organisations, and the PCA decided to support these children. Because they were considered the cornerstone of the social, moral, and political rehabilitation of the continent, their psychological well-being was essential to the affirmation, and often reconstruction, of the family and its values.

### An Unlikely Agreement: Family Reunification as a New Paradigm in Child-Saving

In the aftermath of the Second World War, family reunification became an axiom in Western child relief efforts. While the mental and physical health of the child was the main goal, political motives were also at play: according to prominent activists, protecting the family unit stood against totalitarian attacks. Emerging theories of totalitarianism argued that the weakening of the family unit was a foundational principle of those regimes that sought to merge the individual's needs and rights with the collective needs of the state.<sup>42</sup> Humanitarian organisations, predominantly consisting of North American and British social workers, advocated for a reconstruction of Europe based on the advancement of liberal individualism, which was founded upon the family as guarantor of its development.

The social, political, and cultural importance of preserving the family, and reimagining it as a weapon in the fight against totalitarianism, was also supported by psychological and psychoanalytical theories arguing that family separation was severely traumatic for the infant and child. Anna Freud's wartime work with the Hampstead nurseries for young evacuees from London was particularly influential to this school of thought; it led Freud to identify family separation as a major stressor for children and to oppose state intervention in the family in all cases except extreme abuse.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, and within the same period, British psychoanalyst John Bowlby hypothesised that a lack

<sup>38</sup> Bishop of Padua Carlo Agostini's letter to the Substitute of the Secretariat of State Giovanni Battista Montini, 20 July 1946, AAV, Segreteria di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, Casi particolari, Centri di accoglienza, f. 360.

<sup>39</sup> *Rapporto di sua Eccellenza Monsignor Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, 6.000 giovinetti libici*, 27 July 1946, AAV, Segreteria di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, Protocollo 139113.

<sup>40</sup> 'Grande dimostrazione di Profughi dalla Libia a Assisi,' *Il nuovo corriere*, 12 July 1946, 2. Segreteria di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, Casi particolari, Centri di accoglienza.

<sup>41</sup> 'Grande dimostrazione di Profughi dalla Libia a Assisi,' *Il nuovo Corriere*.

<sup>42</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951); Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space,' *History of the Human Sciences* 6, no. 2 (1993): 97–114; Peg Birmingham, *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Goldstein, Anna Freud and Albert J. Solnit, *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1973).

of attachment between an infant and its primary caregiver, usually the mother, resulted in long-term social, emotional, and cognitive delays for the child.<sup>44</sup> Michal Shapira has argued that social workers and administrators heavily relied on these studies to understand the impact of stress on the child's growth and development, hoping to prevent 'submission to an authoritarian leader' as adults.<sup>45</sup> This widely adopted psychoanalytic theory held that rearing a healthy individual required a solid family structure, which would ultimately constitute the bedrock of a democratic society. These propositions soon took hold throughout Great Britain and then in the United States, whose Allied Commission Control played a significant role in the negotiations for the unification of the families of Italian settlers in Libya.

Catholic intellectuals were also rethinking humanitarian action and the role of the family. In the decades before the Second World War, the papacy had worked to affirm the doctrine of the social reign of Christ, wherein the Church established the primacy of the family over the state and its role within the private sphere.<sup>46</sup> Families, as envisioned in the 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, were to realise God's kingdom on earth through the Church. In *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) the family, rather than the individual worker, became an economic unit; when a husband earned a wage high enough that his wife did not have to work, he was thought to have achieved economic prosperity.<sup>47</sup> Speaking to an audience of newly married couples in June 1940, Pius XII argued that the cohesion and continuity of social bonds can be maintained by the family, with its 'economic communality and moral solidarity, which transmit from generation to generation the precious inheritance of religious faith: unvaried ideals and an unchanged civilization'.<sup>48</sup> Catholics understood the family as the bastion of social virtue and worked to define the private sphere: with a reproductive family at its centre, it included a working father and a stay-at-home mother, married in the Church, tied by Catholic law to regulate sexuality and divorce, encouraged to procreate for the Church and their fatherland. Returning children to their parents and guaranteeing the sanctity of the family unit as a conduit of religious faith should be understood as an outgrowth of this doctrine and its politics – which meant a disregard for family separation when it came to the Jewish population.<sup>49</sup>

Promoted by the Church to its own ends, this conservative family model provided an unexpected point of convergence for the international conversation taking place among policymakers in Western Europe about the psychological needs of children and parents, with an emphasis on child attachment, maternal bonding, and the nuclear family model. In their vision, women were to be pushed out of professional work and back into the home to rear children, shouldering the sole responsibility for discipline and care, while men continued to work outside the home, devoid of any such childrearing expectations. In particular, British and American humanitarians, intellectuals, and politicians upheld this family model as an 'apolitical sanctuary' meant to de-Nazify, de-communise, and democratise societies, and, ultimately, to help return them to normalcy.<sup>50</sup> They based this position on national liberal traditions that considered the family, as opposed to the state, the bedrock of society. Following the Anglo-American, familialist vision of child rescuing that dominated in the postwar, as defined by Tara

<sup>44</sup> Inge Bretherton, 'The Origins of Attachment Theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth,' *Developmental Psychology* 28, no. 5 (1992): 759–75.

<sup>45</sup> Michal Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 21.

<sup>46</sup> Daniele Menozzi, 'Secolarizzazione, cristianità e regno sociale di Cristo,' *Le carte notizie e testi della Fondazione Romolo Murri* 2 (1997): 7–18.

<sup>47</sup> Chappel, *Catholic Modern*, 59–107.

<sup>48</sup> *Insegnamenti pontifici*, vol. 1, *Il matrimonio*, cit., 288–9.

<sup>49</sup> The Vatican saw reconstructing families as the solution only when it fit its ecclesiastical vision. The most striking cases diverging from this principle are of Jewish children who had been sheltered from persecution during the war by Catholic families and institutions, and who were now at the centre of fierce custody battles that redefined the Church-state relationship in the aftermath of the war. Catherine Poujol and Chantal Thoinet, *Les enfants cachés: l'affaire Finaly (1945–1953)* (Paris: Éditeurs Berg International, 2006); David I. Kertzer, and Roberto Benedetti, 'The Vatican's Role in the Finaly Children's Kidnapping Case,' *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 15, no. 1 (2020): 1–21.

<sup>50</sup> Zahra, *The Lost Children of Europe*, 95.

Zahra, the Allied Control Command at the British Military Administration supported, at least in theory, the reunification schemes presented by the Vatican as being in line with their own child-rescuing approach.

### *The Ideological Foundations of the PCA's Resettlement Scheme*

According to one of the main architects behind the reunification of the Italian children of Libya, Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, 'one of the most burdensome problems created by the war, its most painful and most deleterious consequences, is undoubtedly the chaos and the upheaval caused in families'.<sup>51</sup> The evacuation, first of young children and then of women, the elderly, and sick people, had destroyed families and torn apart villages, he claimed. Facchinetti also commented that while some of the husbands left alone in Tripolitania 'have ended up adapting to this extraordinary way of life, the great majority immediately felt uncomfortable, and only wished for the return of their wives and children'.<sup>52</sup> Facchinetti's attempts to return the children through his work for the PCA had the goal of ameliorating the conditions of those who experienced the trauma of separation.

Psychological concerns were not his only motives: Facchinetti was a staunch and unrepentant fascist who believed that Libya needed to remain an Italian colony.<sup>53</sup> In his typescript *Gli italiani colonizzatori della Libia*, he argued that the work accomplished by the Italians in Libya 'was not the result of fascist imperial robberies, but simply the conquest of the effort and work of another people who did not want, but endured and cursed, the war along with the regime that hurled it into the world'.<sup>54</sup> While Facchinetti's position does not account for the Holy See's stance on the Italian presence in North Africa, the PCA heavily relied on his work to coordinate the return operations.

The PCA's attempts to organise the children's return, led by Monsignor Baldelli, started in the months leading up to the end of the war in Europe, but little could be done during such a moment of transition. In March 1945, the Italian Ministry of the Navy offered the Allied forces ships to facilitate the return.<sup>55</sup> But the operation required additional preparation: the complex political and diplomatic situation between the metropole and the ex-colony prevented officials from further planning. Nothing came of the PCA's initial requests to organise the repatriation to Libya.

It took months to reach an agreement on repatriation, during which the PCA emerged as an intermediary for the Ministry of Italian Africa.<sup>56</sup> As a privileged interlocutor of the ACC in Italy and the involved international organisations, the PCA was the crucial link that allowed young Italians from Libya to be returned to the ex-colony and reunited with their family members. On the ground, the organisation could take advantage of emissaries and vicars scattered throughout the ex-Italian possession who, in the case of the Italian children of Libya, ended up playing a major role in relocating the minors by directly engaging with BMA representatives.

On 3 May 1945, a few days after the end of the war, the PCA was already in motion to send delegates via plane to Libya to assess the situation *in loco*.<sup>57</sup> Among them was Violetta Thurstan, the Middle East Commissioner for the Catholic Council for Relief Abroad (CCRA), asked by Baldelli

<sup>51</sup> Camillo Vittorino Facchinetti, *Come mi accadde di diventare 'questore'*, typescript, AAV, Segreteria di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, 442–82, 1. Facchinetti numbered the pages of the typescript. Here I am therefore using the page number listed by the author. Another copy of the typescript is at ASMAE, Ufficio per gli Affari del soppresso Ministero Africa Italiana, 1 (44), folder 15.

<sup>52</sup> Facchinetti, *Come mi accadde di diventare 'questore'*, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Giorgio Tosco, 'Al crocevia fra Chiesa, Fascismo e colonialismo: il congresso eucaristico di Tripoli (1937)', *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà* 30 (2017): 283–314.

<sup>54</sup> The typescript is inspired by a speech Facchinetti delivered on 21 Aug. 1945, at the Circolo Italiano Manifestazioni Artistico Sportive in Tripoli, before the British authorities, in which he hoped 'that this Libyan land, which has cost us so much blood, so much money, so much work, so many sacrifices, can also return to the motherland.' Facchinetti, *Gli italiani colonizzatori della Libia*, 1.

<sup>55</sup> 'Profughi di guerra della Libia,' 2 Mar. 1945, ACS, PCM, 44–47, b. 3543, fasc. 17.4/30208.

<sup>56</sup> Italia ex possedimenti Libia, 'Ritorno in Tripolitania di profughi colà residenti,' 14 Nov. 1946, folder 9, ASDMAE AP 1946–1950.

<sup>57</sup> Ministero della Marina, Gabinetto Roma, 3 May 1945, Prot. n. B/5455, ACS, PCM, 1944–1947.

to support the PCA mission in returning children to their families. English by birth, she was in Cairo at the time in her capacity as Commissioner, which facilitated her travel to the capital of Libya. While in Tripoli, Thurstan met with high-up military administrators of the BMA to discuss the possibility of returning Italian children to their families.<sup>58</sup> The fieldwork carried out by Thurstan proved to be of vital importance to garner the support of the Allied authorities and to determine the ability of families to provide for the well-being of children once they returned to Libya.<sup>59</sup>

In May 1945, Thurstan met representatives of the BMA to test the waters, seeking advice on how to advance the cause of family reunification. For their part, the BMA and ACC aimed at containing the Italian presence in the ex-colony and restricting access to those who had left or had been evacuated. As the Libyan economy stalled, unemployment was high, as was general discontent among the indigenous population; a growing Italian presence threatened to trigger violence and revolts. In a later report to Baldelli, she wrote that ‘repatriating’ the children to Libya was a delicate operation that needed to take into account the newly changed political and economic landscape.<sup>60</sup> As stated in an account of Libya for the PCA, the situation was very different from that of prewar years, when the territory had been under Italian rule.<sup>61</sup> Native populations would have revolted at the sight of a large re-entry.

These fears of protest were confirmed by multiple missives to Vatican representatives across North Africa engaged in rescue efforts. Monsignor Arthur Hughes, Apostolic Delegate in Cairo since 1942, advised Montini to address the situation with caution.<sup>62</sup> Referring to the possible repatriation of Italian children of Egypt, who had also left North Africa for the Italian Youth of the Lictor Abroad (*Gioventù italiana del Littorio all'estero*; GILE) at the onset of war, Hughes reported that all British representatives considered Italians in Egypt to be calm and disciplined at the moment. Yet, Hughes argued, the return of all these children, who had been inculcated with fascist ideals, could lead to reprisals against the Italian community in Egypt. Thurstan reported to the PCA that the still unresolved ‘question of colonisation’ was indeed crucial and that ‘if the Arabs saw a large number of Italians, even children, arriving in Tripoli, their thought would be a return to Italian colonisation that would rob them of their lands. An Arab revolt would be the consequence unless this project was carried out as quietly as possible.’<sup>63</sup> Small acts of resistance to Italians arriving in Libya had already provoked riots among the native populations; the risk of a larger crisis had to be mitigated. To this end, BMA authorities advised that the operation had to be presented to the population as an act of secular humanitarianism, as Libyans often saw the advancement of fascism in lockstep with Catholicism.<sup>64</sup>

Ultimately, the BMA granted the reunification of minors out of humanitarian concern, approving staggered and small re-entries for underage Italian refugees returning to their families in Libya, in cases when reunification appeared to guarantee an improvement in the child’s financial security.<sup>65</sup> According to this ‘breadwinner scheme’, the head of the household had to guarantee the family’s economic support.<sup>66</sup> Those children who had reached the age of sixteen could not be sent back as they purportedly could provide for themselves and did not need the support of another breadwinner.

<sup>58</sup> Ferdinando Baldelli to Giovanni Battista Montini, 22 June 1945, Prot. N. 9520/5, *Rimpatrio Bambini libici*, AAV, Segr. di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, f. 21.

<sup>59</sup> Christine E. Hallett, *Nurse Writers of the Great War* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2016), 143–70.

<sup>60</sup> Confidential report on the repatriation of Italian children by Violetta Thurstan, AAV, Segr. di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, ff. 22–27.

<sup>61</sup> *Profughi libici*, Rome, 30 Apr. 1945, Direzione Generale Affari Politici, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Seg. Pol 364/e, AAV, Segr. di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, ff. 14–15.

<sup>62</sup> Arthur Hughes to Giovanni Battista Montini, 24 Jan. 1945, AAV, Segr. di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 25, f. 124.

<sup>63</sup> Confidential report on the repatriation of Italian children by Violetta Thurstan, 2, AAV, Segr. di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, f. 23.

<sup>64</sup> Eileen Ryan, *Religion as Resistance: Negotiating Authority in Italian Libya* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 159–64.

<sup>65</sup> *Rimpatrio Profughi Tripolitania*, Tito Zaniboni to the Headquarter of the ACC, Displaced Persons and Repatriation Subcommittee, 9 Oct. 1944., ACS, PCM, 44–47, 1.1.2/10407.

<sup>66</sup> Direzione Generale Affari Politici to Commissione Alleata, Memorandum, 21 Nov. 1945, ASDMAE, Affari Politici, 1946–1950, Italia ex possedimenti Libia, folder 10.

In later negotiations between the representatives of the Ministry of Italian Africa and members of the BMA, it was further specified that the so-called breadwinner had to be employed.<sup>67</sup>

Upon her visit to Brigadier Travers Robert Backley at BMA headquarters in Tripoli, Thurstan received specific instructions on how to proceed. First, the PCAP would draw up a complete list of all the children. To be considered, children had to be below sixteen years of age, but girls were still eligible to return to Libya under the protection of their parents until the age of twenty, as were boys over sixteen ineligible for military conscription or incapable of financially supporting themselves.<sup>68</sup> A list of family members in Libya and a report on their financial condition were also required to demonstrate that the children would be taken care of upon arrival. The guidelines put forward by BMA officials emphasised the importance of returning children to an economically self-sufficient household, as the British government had a stated desire to maintain order and decorum inside and outside of the family, providing a gendered rubric for humanitarian intervention. Monsignor Facchinetti occupied a crucial role in ascertaining the families' economic and moral status, as he was asked by the PCA to make sure they fit the requirements. His presence on the ground since 1936 as the apostolic vicar served as a guarantee for the BMA. The ACC requested that travel expenses be covered exclusively by the Italian government; this included all means of transportation, accompanying personnel (Italian nurses and British caretakers), immunisations, and pocket money for the children's first days in Libya. When the BMA gave the green light, the Allied Command in Italy approved this plan for the transfer.

The logistics of the reunification were largely geared to containing the Italian presence by limiting who could return and facilitating those who wanted to leave, thus assuring a minimal increase of Italian presence in the region.<sup>69</sup> Representatives of the Italian Red Cross, of the Catholic Committee for Relief Abroad, and a North American prelate of the National Catholic Welfare Conference would accompany the children on their voyage back to Libya. The Italian government, more specifically the Ministry of the Interior, was to cover the costs of the transfers; the Ministry of the Navy would provide the ships, to transport them and return to the motherland sick people or any person who wished to leave.

The fate of the youths was the responsibility of the Italian state, but its inefficiency, and lack of funds and operational support, meant the returns ended up being administered by the PCA in concert with the Relief Distribution National Agency (Ente nazionale per la distribuzione soccorsi in Italia; ENDSI).<sup>70</sup> Founded in September 1944, ENDSI ran most of the operations concerning national refugees, which were facilitated by the PCA.<sup>71</sup> The agency comprised representatives from the Vatican, the Italian government, and the Italian Red Cross. ENDSI managed the initial donation of ten million lire by the Italian government, helped sort donations from the Red Cross and private individuals, and administered donations from the United States, specifically from American Relief for Italy, which made a considerable donation to the agency.<sup>72</sup> This last organisation was supported by private Italian American charities, most of which were Catholic, and by monies from the National War Fund.<sup>73</sup>

This family reunification project involved roughly 3,000 children who were sent to Libya in nine groups between 1945 and March 1947. The speed and process of the reunions followed the guidelines furnished by the BMA, a re-entry in small instalments that prevented possible riots and protests among Libyans, averting the fear of a new attempt at colonising the territories. There were also

<sup>67</sup> P. J. Sandison, 'Minutes of discussion with Representatives of the Ministero dell'Africa Italiana 16/17 Oct. 1946,' ASDMAE, Africa, vol. 4, Ufficio per gli Affari del Soppresso Ministero Africa Italiana 1946–1947, folder 1, f. 42.

<sup>68</sup> Italia ex possedimenti Libia, b. 9, *Rientro in Tripolitania dei profughi*, 3–4, ASDMAE AP 1946–1950.

<sup>69</sup> *Viaggio nave Campidoglio a Tripoli*, Resoconto di Alcide De Gasperi alla Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, al ministero del Tesoro, alla Ragioneria Centrale, 20 Aug. 1947, 3, ACS, PCM, 48–50, 12.491.1.

<sup>70</sup> Silvia Salvatici, 'Between National and International Mandates. Displaced Persons and Refugees in Postwar Italy,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, Special Issue: Refugees and the Nation-State in Europe, 1919–1959, no. 3 (July 2014): 514–36.

<sup>71</sup> Giacomo Canepa, 'Rifare gli italiani. Profughi e progetti per il welfare (1944–47),' *Meridiana* 86, Profughi (2016): 66.

<sup>72</sup> Giovanni Canaperia, *L'Attività dell'Endsi*, 27 Feb. 1945, in ACS, PCM, Segreteria particolare Alcide De Gasperi, folder 10.

<sup>73</sup> Violi, 'La Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza nel Sud degli anni Quaranta,' 63.



practical reasons why only a few thousand were sent back to Libya: by the end of the war, many of the 12,000 children were teenagers and no longer qualified back. Operations were also slowed down by numerous obstacles: Italy's economic conditions, transportation and logistical difficulties, and the delicate international situation, in particular the tenuous relations between Italy and its former colony. Despite challenges, the return scheme elaborated for the children of the ex-colony was considered broadly successful. Indeed, Major Hartmann of the ACC suggested adopting it for the children of Italians residing abroad – specifically in Egypt, where a conspicuous Italian community was awaiting them.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the Vatican's large display of force to return the children to Libya, the BMA worked to contain the Italian presence in the ex-colony and to restrict access to those who had been evacuated at the onset of the war. While the BMA and ACC agreed to the humanitarian scheme out of concern for the children's moral, psychological, and social wellbeing, the Italian government often lamented British administrators' attempts to return male adult ex-settlers to Italy, defying the agreement based on the breadwinner logic. For example, the return of a British ship to Taranto and Naples between September and October 1945 of almost 500 Italian men, all of whom were previously gainfully employed in Libya, violated this principle and led to a feisty exchange between Chief Commissioner of the Allied Control Commission in Italy Ellery W. Stone, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Renato Prunas, and Vittorio Zoppi from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>75</sup> The Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs decried the arrival of these skilled workers in a country that was experiencing high unemployment, overall contributing to the 'refugee problem', as the new arrivals would further strain the competition for jobs.<sup>76</sup>

After such painstaking negotiations, relocating refugees in the attempt to reunite families continued to be a contentious issue, emphasising the symbolic importance of these families. When family reunification was granted out of humanitarian concerns, as in the case of underage refugees, the BMA only approved contained re-entries in order not to alter the delicate postwar equilibrium. In terms of the grand plans of rethinking family structures with an ever-more Catholic valence, the Vatican, through the PCA, was able to demonstrate its newly achieved influence and continue staking its claim on this new space of intervention: the family.

Determining the children's best interests was a loaded issue in the aftermath of the Second World War. According to various humanitarian organisations, the fate of Europe hung in the balance. Specifically, for the Vatican, Catholic families were to be reunited in the hopes of re-establishing an order that could lead to building stable societies, a hope inextricable from the Church's own desire to assert itself on the world stage, making inroads into the public sphere by means of its rhetoric surrounding the private. This small-scale operation, dependent on the personalities and political leanings of the agents on both sides of the bargaining table and the specific conditions of the country and the native population, did little to extend Italy's influence in Libya. Nonetheless, it ultimately contributed to a transnational conversation on the reconstruction of the continent, on Italy's colonial past, as well as its present ambitions over the ex-colony.

<sup>74</sup> Otto Faller to Giovanni Battista Montini, 8 Aug. 1945, AAV, Segr. di Stato, Commissione Soccorsi 24, ff. 45–6.

<sup>75</sup> *Rimpatrio dalla Tripolitania e ritorno in colonia di connazionali colà residenti*, letter from the Secretary General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Renato Prunas to the Chief Commissioner of the Allied Control Commission in Italy Ellery W. Stone, 23 Nov. 1945, 11/27798/73, folder 10, ASDMAE, Affari Politici, 1946–1950.

<sup>76</sup> Italia ex possedimenti Libia, Direzione Generale Affari Politici to Commissione Alleata, Memorandum, 21 Nov. 1945, folder 10, 2, ASDMAE, Affari Politici, 1946–1950.